



The Dancing Seagull

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/228-The-Dancing-Seagull>

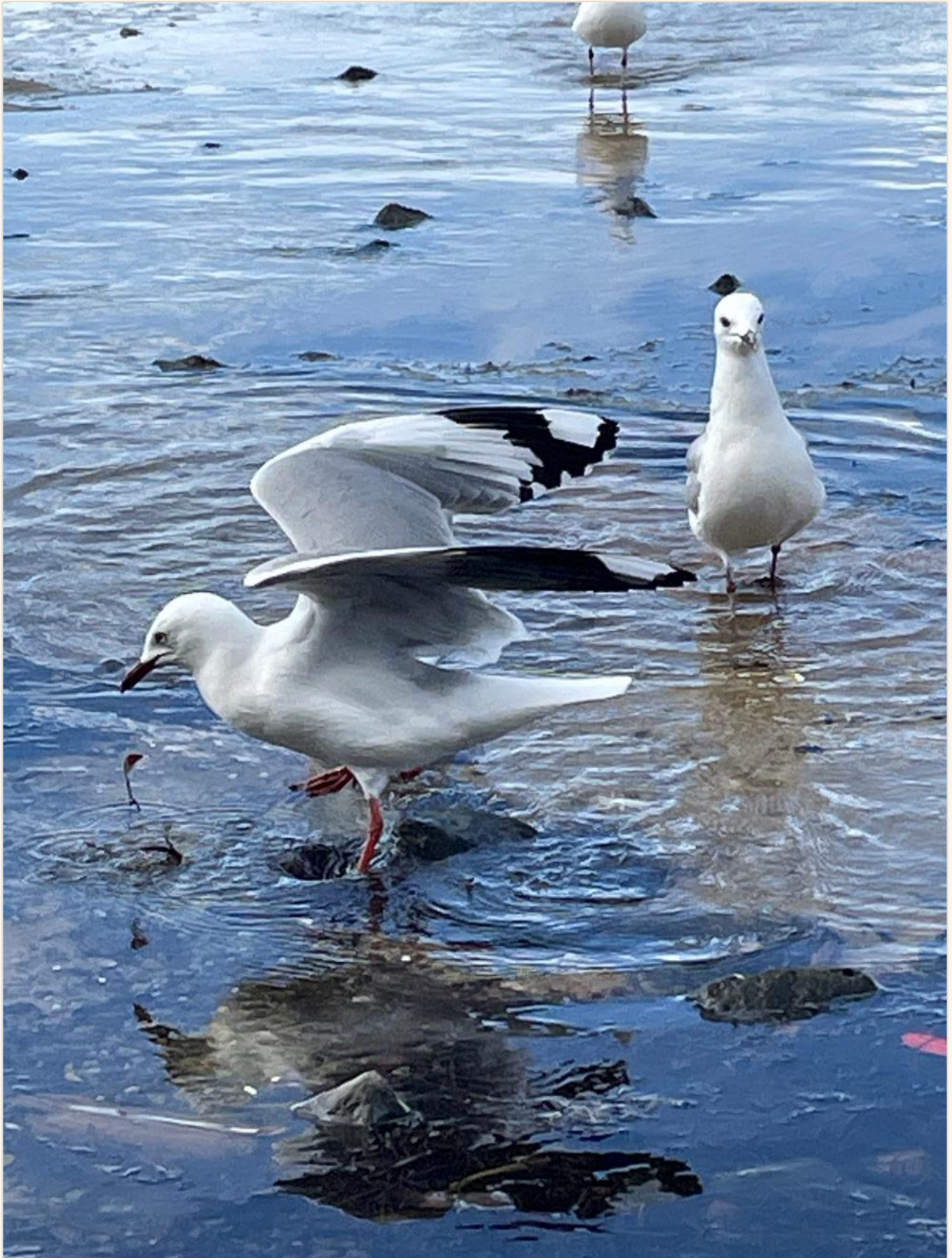
MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I'm excited to guide you through the process of painting 'The Dancing Seagull,' where abstraction meets realism in a harmonious dance. We'll explore how to create expressive abstract backgrounds that set the stage for the striking details of a beautiful seagull in motion. This scene is a rewarding subject because it challenges us to focus on the essence of the seagull's graceful shape and movement. As we paint, I'll emphasize the importance of starting with a strong design concept, ensuring every brushstroke contributes to the overall idea. You'll learn to embrace risk, understanding that sometimes sacrificing parts of your painting can lead to greater achievements. Remember, if you push too far, you can always paint it back. I'll also encourage you to listen to your inner voice, allowing your unique artistic expression to shine through. With a simple palette and a painterly approach, we'll delve into good design, accurate drawing, and passionate brushwork. Let's embark on this creative journey together, and I hope you find joy and inspiration in every stroke.



"The Dancing Seagull" 15x15" Oil on Canvas



REFERENCE PHOTO

The scene as Richard found it.

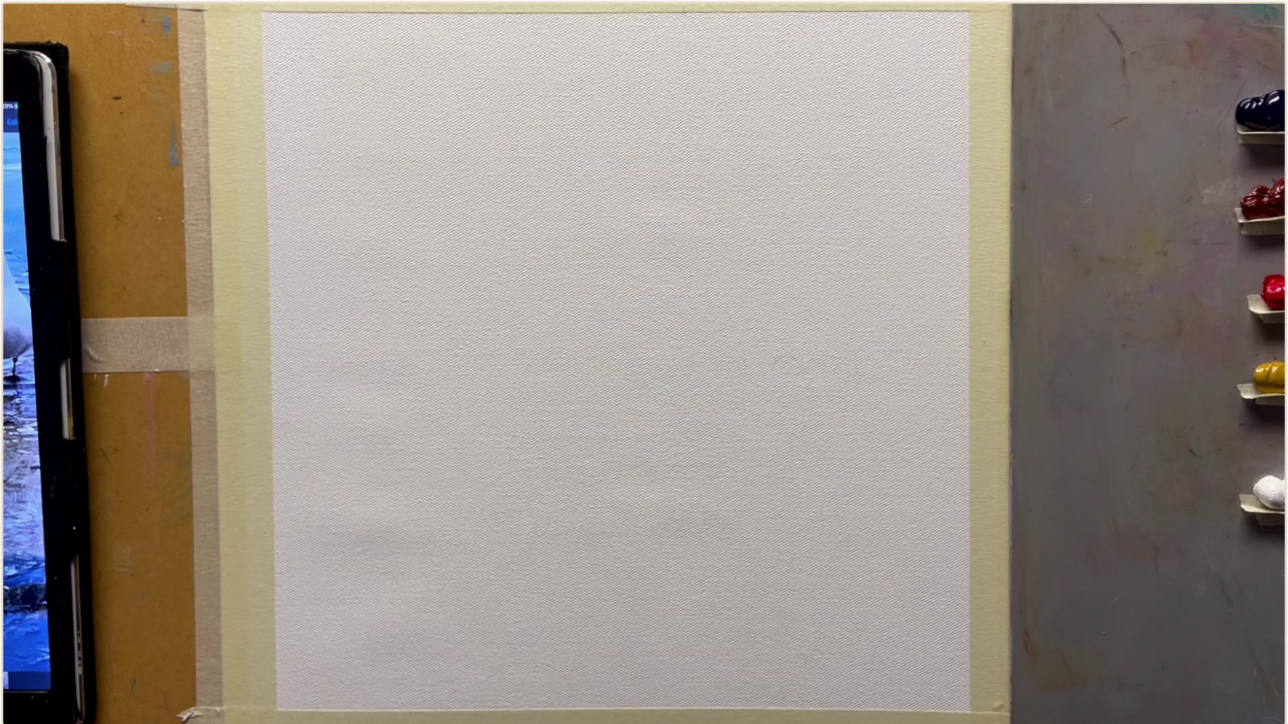
Materials

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
- Cadmium Red
- Yellow Ochre
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium or Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas.
- 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 Materials and Palette



Prepare Your Canvas

Tape a 15-inch square Frederick's ultra-smooth canvas onto your board to keep it secure while painting.

Select Your Brushes

Choose a couple of long flat brushes: one bristle and one synthetic. Also, include a small synthetic dagger brush in sizes 10, 6, and 3 for detailed work.

Choose Your Paints

Use M. Graham's oils or any other oil paints or acrylics you prefer. This flexibility allows you to work with materials you are comfortable with.

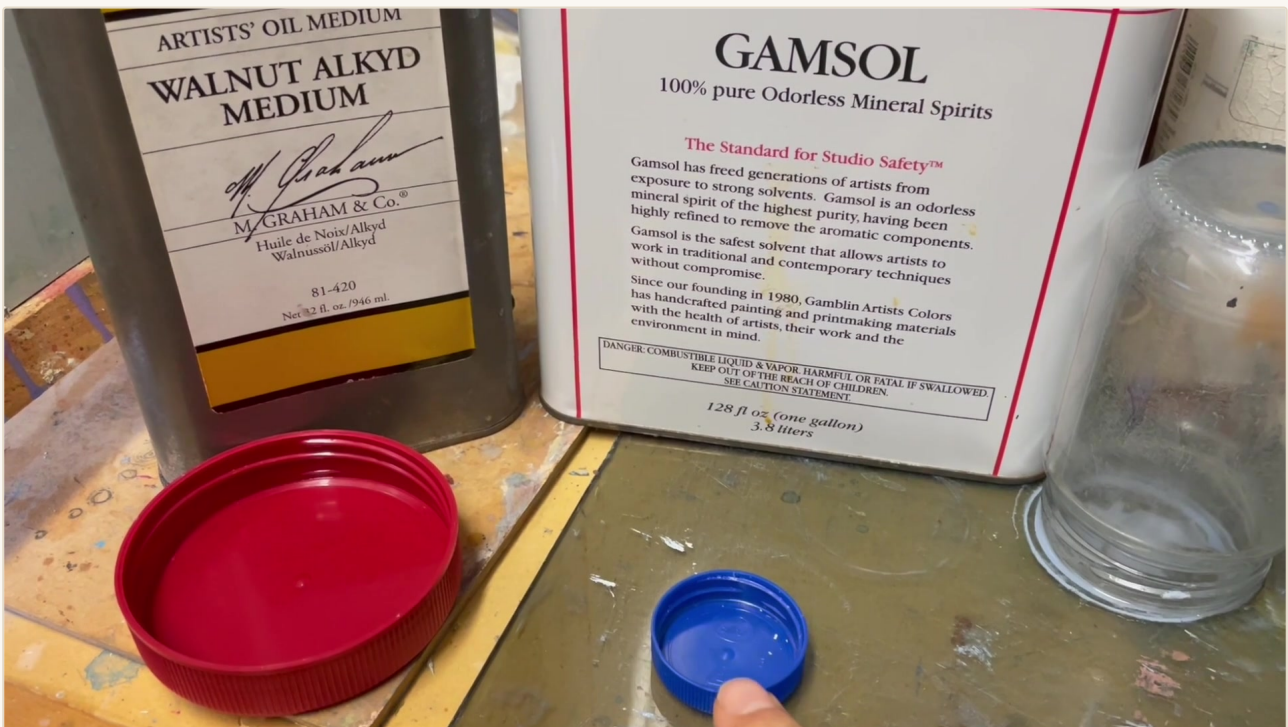
Set Up Your Palette

Arrange a simple palette with ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, cadmium red, yellow ochre, and white. This limited palette will simplify color mixing and enhance color harmony in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use a limited palette to make color mixing easier and create a harmonious painting.

2 Mediums and Their Uses



Use Walnut Alkyde Medium

Apply walnut alkyde medium to help the paint flow better onto the canvas. Use it mainly in the darks and mid values to ensure they sit flatter on the canvas.

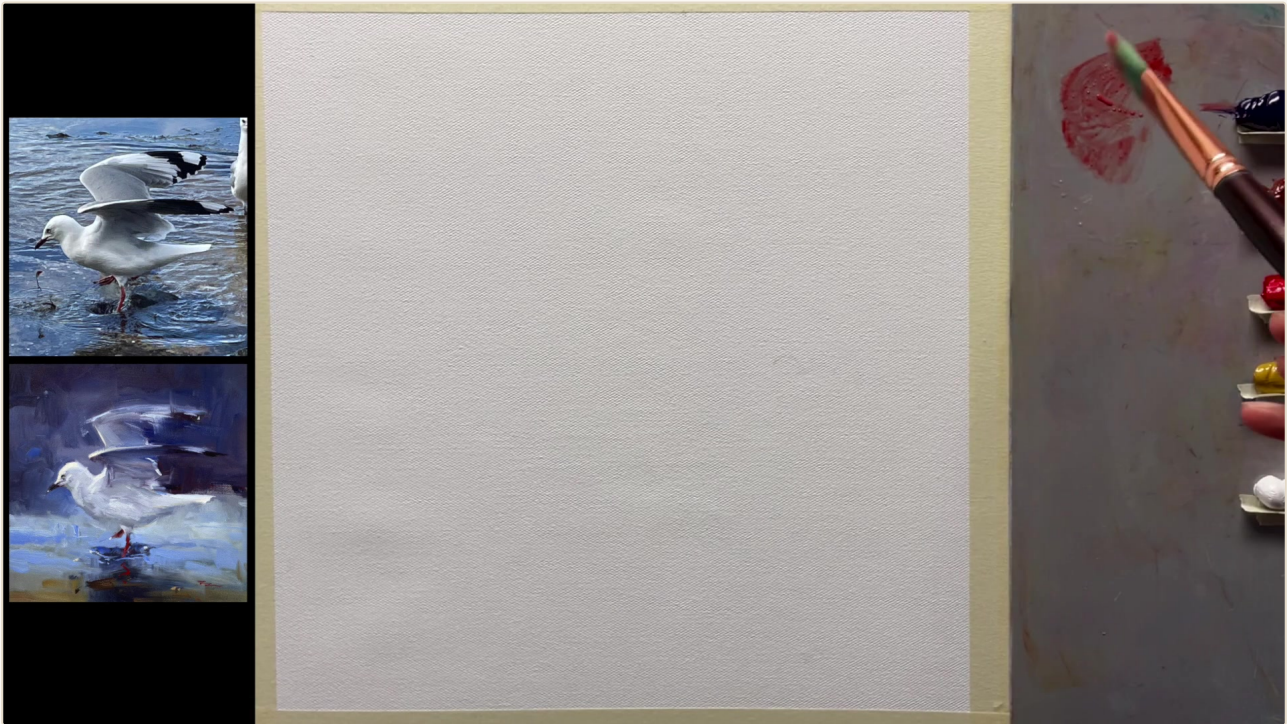
Use Gamsol for Sketching

Utilize gamsol during the sketching and initial block-in stages of the painting. This helps to establish the composition and basic shapes effectively.

PRO TIP

Use walnut alkyde medium for smoother application in darks and mid values.

3 Blocking in the Background



Prepare Your Brush

Wet your large brush with a little bit of Gamsol to ensure smooth application of paint.

Mix Your Colors

Combine red and ultramarine blue on your palette, adding a bit more red to achieve a rich, dark tone. Add a little more Gamsol to thin the mixture for easier spreading.

Block in the Background

Apply the dark mixture briskly in the center of the canvas to establish a bold background. Focus on creating a large, dark area without worrying about precise shapes at this stage.

Consider Your Approach

If you're concerned about drawing accuracy, sketch the seagull beforehand using a grid method or projection. Alternatively, embrace a freer style by painting the dark background first and refining shapes later.

PRO TIP

Use a rag to pull out lighter shapes from the dark background for a painterly effect.

4 Drawing with Paint



Create a Patchy Background

Mix blue and white paint to create a base color. Apply this mixture to the canvas in a patchy, expressionistic manner. Avoid covering the entire area with one color to maintain a rough, exciting texture.

Define the Foreground Wing

Add more blue to your mixture to create a darker shade. Use this darker color to outline where you believe the foreground wing should be. Ensure the mixture is dark enough to stand out against the background.

Establish the Second Wing

Identify the line for the dark area at the back of the second wing. Use the same dark mixture to mark this line, helping to define the basic design of the wings.

Add Dark Patches

Locate the dark patch under the foot and use your dark mixture to paint it. This adds depth and helps in building the overall structure of the seagull.

PRO TIP

Use a patchy, expressionistic approach to keep the painting dynamic and textured.

5 Designing the Background



Design the Background

Consider adding a large dark block to the top of your painting to create a strong design contrast. This will help the light subject, like a seagull, stand out against the dark background. Balance this with a dark reflection in the foreground to maintain harmony in the composition.

PRO TIP

Squint at your reference photo and painting to see if the main subject stands out effectively against the background.

6 Drawing the Seagull's Shape



Mix a Neutral Gray

Add a little white and red to your existing mixture to create a fairly neutral gray. This will be used to define the seagull's shape.

Outline the Wing

Carefully draw around the shape of the wing with your brush. Focus on capturing the critical curves and edges that define the wing's form.

Use Gestural Brushwork

As you move away from the wing, allow your brushwork to become rough and gestural. This will add a dynamic feel to the painting.

Define Critical Shapes

Pay attention to the critical shape just behind the neck where the wing meets the body. This area is important for the overall structure of the seagull.

Start Curves with Straight Edges

Begin drawing curves with straight edges to get the main angles right. Once the angles are established, cut away to create the curves, adding a slightly chiseled look.

PRO TIP

Start curves with straight edges to ensure accuracy before refining them into smooth curves.

7 Color and Contrast



Block in Large Color Areas

Mix yellow ochre and white to create a broad color area underneath the bird. Focus on large shapes rather than details at this stage.

Define the Bird's Head

Add blue to your mix and carefully observe the angles of the bird's head. Use a few deliberate brush strokes to capture these angles, aiming for precision with minimal strokes.

Enhance Contrast with Dark Reflections

Add more blue to darken the reflection underneath the bird. This will help to create contrast and define the form.

Simplify by Squinting

Squint at your reference to see large shapes and avoid getting distracted by details. This technique helps in focusing on the overall composition and color blocking.

Create Color Variety

Introduce a greenish color behind the seagull to punch up the color. This adds interest and variety within the large shapes, merging them seamlessly.

PRO TIP

Squint at your reference to focus on large shapes and simplify your painting process.

8 Color Proportions and Balance



Create Contrast with Color

Mix burnt sienna, a little yellow ochre, a little blue, and a touch of white to create a brown. Adjust to a greeny brown to add more color to the bottom of the foreground. This will create a striking contrast against the gray background and the gray in the seagull.

Balance Color Proportions

Consider the proportions of color in your painting. Aim for a composition that is three quarters gray and one quarter color to achieve an asymmetrical balance. This approach allows the color to shine against the gray, creating visual interest.

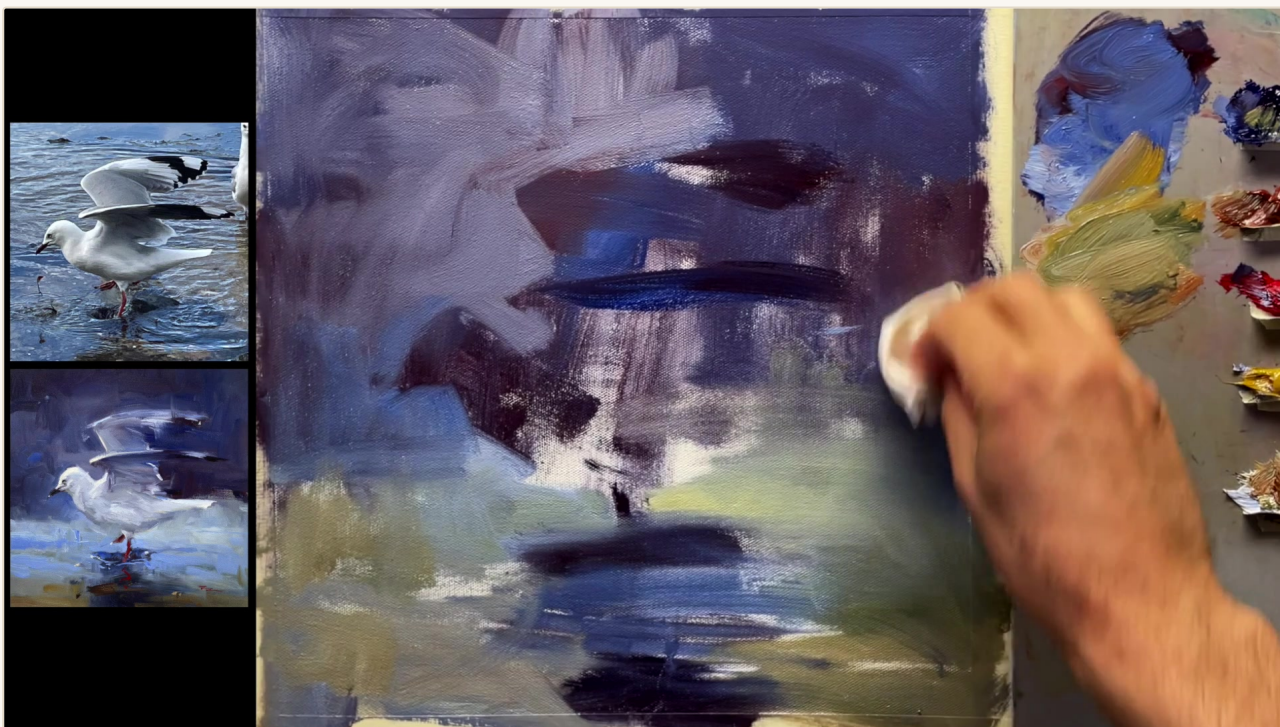
Experiment with Light and Dark

Apply the same proportional thinking to light and dark areas. You can create a painting that is mainly dark with a little light, or mainly light with a little dark. Experimenting with these proportions will give you control over the painting's mood.

PRO TIP

Use asymmetrical balance by contrasting a predominantly gray painting with small, vibrant areas of color.

9 Textural Interest with Tissue



Create Textural Interest

Use a tissue to merge certain areas of the painting, adding texture that a brush cannot achieve. Focus on specific sections to enhance the painting's overall interest and hold the viewer's attention.

Wipe Out Light Areas

Carefully use a clean tissue to wipe out some of the light areas, ensuring no lint is left behind. This technique allows the light areas to glow by exposing the white canvas, which provides a brighter effect than painting light over dark.

PRO TIP

Use a clean tissue to avoid leaving lint on the canvas when wiping out light areas.

10 Painting the Seagull's Body



Mix the Base Grey

Mix a cool mid-grey with a touch of blue to create a cooler tone. Ensure the value matches the mid-grey on your palette when viewed in black and white.

Shape the Seagull's Body

Begin with a slightly lighter grey to paint the body, focusing on capturing the egg-like shape. Use big brush strokes to define the darker areas first, especially at the back, while squinting to see the big shapes.

Add Reflected Light

Introduce a bit more reflected light under the chest to give a lighter feel and add color variation. Darken the seagull's rear for contrast.

Use Brush Techniques

Utilize a long flat brush to create broad marks and fine edges as needed. Practice brush swings to plan your strokes and adjust the paint loading.

Build Up Values

Start with the darkest darks and gradually work up through the mid-values to the lightest lights. Avoid using pure white too early to prevent a flat appearance, saving it for the brightest highlights like the forehead.

PRO TIP

Begin with the darkest darks and gradually build up to the lightest lights for a more dimensional effect.

11 Mixing Grays



Prepare Light Grays

Mix a few different piles of light grays using your palette knife. Arrange them on your palette to have them ready for use. This preparation can make your painting process faster and more efficient.

Apply Grays from Dark to Light

Start applying the grays from dark to mid values, then to lights. This approach helps in building depth and dimension in your painting.

Embrace Variations

Allow for little variations in color and value as you paint. These variations can add a sense of variety and excitement to your work, making it more dynamic.

PRO TIP

Mix light grays in advance to speed up your painting process.

12 Painterly Techniques



Use a Long Synthetic Brush

Switch to a long synthetic brush with a crisp edge. This brush will help you achieve precise lines and a chiseled effect in your painting.

Apply Thick Paint for Lightest Areas

Apply thick paint directly from the tube for the lightest areas, such as the top of the seagull's head. This will create a very crisp edge and highlight the lightest light in your painting.

Segment Curves into Straighter Lines

Segment the curves of the seagull into straighter lines to achieve a chiseled effect. This technique enhances the painterly quality of your work.

Adjust Edges for Painterly Feel

Adjust the edges of the seagull to be sharp in some areas and soft or lost into the background in others. This variation in edge sharpness is key to creating a painterly feel.

PRO TIP

Use a long synthetic brush for crisp edges and a chiseled effect.

13 Highlight Placement



Apply Light Bluish Gray

In the light areas on the wing, apply a very light bluish gray instead of pure white. This helps maintain a subtle painterly effect and prevents overpowering the painting with too many highlights.

Reserve Pure White Highlights

Save the pure white highlights for just one or two strategic locations. This ensures that these highlights effectively guide the viewer's eye to the most important parts of the painting.

PRO TIP

Avoid using pure white everywhere to maintain focus and lead the viewer's eye.

14 Brushwork and Detail



Select a Brush

Switch to a small chisel brush, which is ideal for creating crisp, calligraphic strokes. This brush allows for expressive marks that capture the essence of the subject.

Capture the Impression

Focus on capturing a general impression of the scene rather than copying the photograph exactly. This approach keeps the painting process dynamic and allows for further refinements later.

Paint the Wing

To paint the mid-grey top of the wing, use the remaining white paint on your brush and blend it with greyish colors. Drift the brush lightly over the area to create interesting and varied marks.

PRO TIP

Use a small chisel brush for expressive and calligraphic strokes that capture the essence of the subject.

15 Creating Painterly Texture



Mix a Mid-Grey

Achieve a mid-grey tone by mixing your chosen colors. This will serve as the base for adding texture and detail.

Add Lighter Details

Introduce lighter tones to create ridges and highlights. Be cautious not to overdo it; subtlety will enhance the painterly effect.

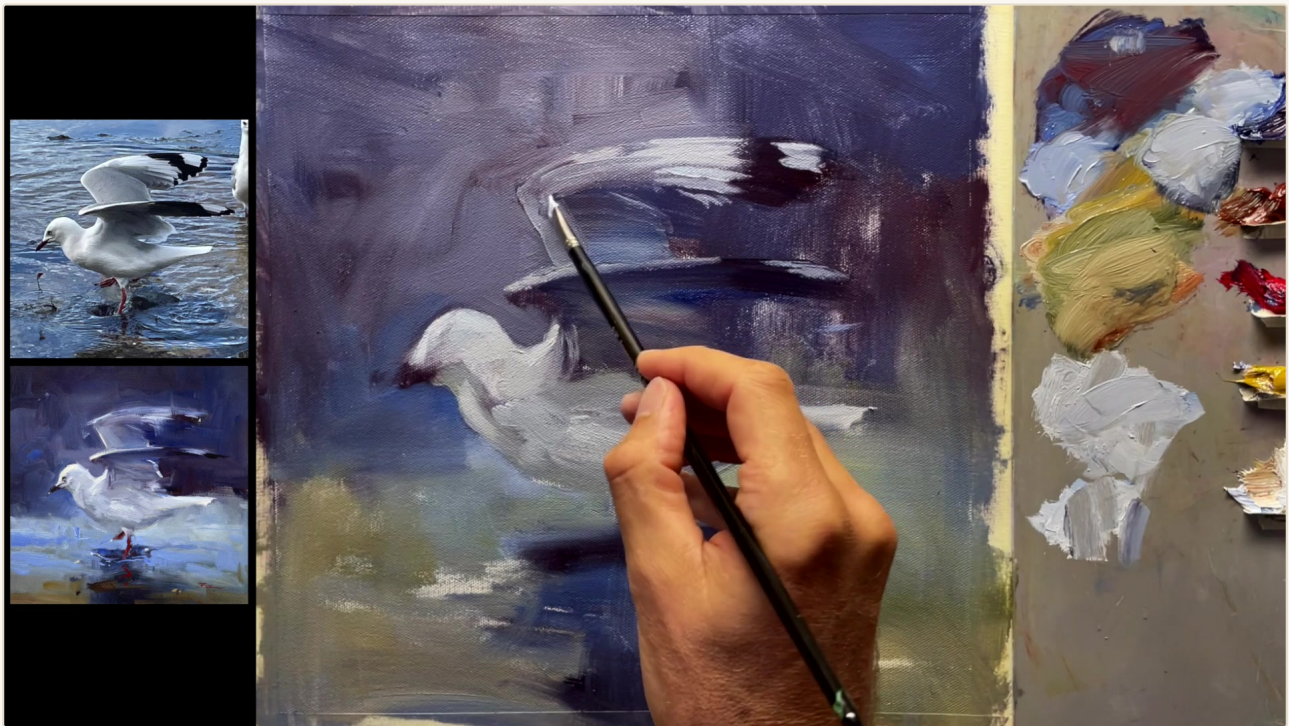
Create Painterly Texture

Avoid a perfectly smooth gradient from dark to light grey. Instead, use varied brushstrokes and jigsaw-like shapes to form an interesting texture that emphasizes the paint's material quality.

PRO TIP

Use varied brushstrokes to create texture and avoid a photographic look.

16 Adding Warmth to Highlights



Add Warmth to Highlights

Mix a small amount of yellow ochre into your highlight color. Apply this warm light to the strongest highlights on the seagull's wing. This warmth will contrast beautifully with the blue grays in the painting, enhancing the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use yellow ochre to add warmth to highlights, creating a pleasing contrast with cooler tones.

17 Maintaining Focus and Flow



Maintain Your Brushes

Ensure your brushes are in good condition to create beautiful marks. If a brush becomes too worn, replace it to maintain the quality of your strokes.

Add Variety to Lines

Avoid using the same thickness and character of line throughout your painting. Introduce variety to create a dynamic and interesting composition.

Lighten Shadows

Delicately scumble a bit of white or bluish-grey to lighten the shadows on the underside of the bird. This adjustment helps the seagull appear as a bird of light, contrasting with the darker background.

PRO TIP

Scumble a bit of white or bluish-grey to lighten overly dark shadows and bring focus to the subject.

18 Light and Shadow on Feathers



Warm Up the Grey Mix

Add a touch of yellow ochre to a very light grey mix. This will create a warm transition area where the light moves from halftone into shadow on the feathers.

Apply the Warm Mix

Use the warm grey mix to paint the transition areas on the seagull's feathers. This simulates the warm tinge created when light penetrates and bounces through the feathers.

Create a Glow Effect

With the warm mix on your brush, add a glow effect to the front of the seagull. This represents light bouncing off the seagull and glowing into the background.

Chisel with Background Color

Use the background color to chisel away at the foreground, especially around the mouth area. This technique helps define and sculpt the seagull's features.

PRO TIP

Use the background color to sculpt and define the edges of the foreground subject.

19 Protecting Creative Space



Study Your Resource

Spend time observing your reference photo thoroughly before making any changes. The more you look at your resource, the better your painting will be. This helps you internalize the subject, especially if you're struggling with capturing its essence.

Maintain Painting Rhythm

Focus on keeping a steady rhythm in your brushwork. Avoid slowing down too much, as it can disrupt the creative flow and make it easy to lose the vibe and feeling of the painting.

Minimize Interruptions

Put your phone on silent and create an uninterrupted space for painting. This helps you maintain the creative flow and prevents time wasted on interruptions, which can break your concentration and make it difficult to return to the flow state.

Create a Dedicated Painting Space

Set aside specific time and space for your art, ensuring that others respect this. Understand that painting is not just an activity but a place you go to, and it's important to protect this creative space from interruptions.

PRO TIP

Put your phone on silent to minimize interruptions and maintain your creative flow.

20 Dark Paint Techniques



Mix Dark Paint

Combine blue, red, and burnt sienna to create a really dark color for the beak. Ensure the mixture is smooth and consistent.

Keep Paint Flat

Apply the dark paint as flat as possible to avoid lumps. Lumps can catch light and disrupt the intended darkness effect.

Use a Medium

Incorporate walnut oil or another painting medium like liquin into your dark and mid-value paints. This helps the paint flow smoothly and sit flat on the canvas.

PRO TIP

Add walnut oil to dark paints to ensure they sit flat and don't catch unwanted light.

21 Detailing the Seagull's Head



Paint the Seagull's Eyes

Focus on placing small, precise shapes for the eyes. Use a mahl stick to steady your hand if needed, as these details are critical.

Mix and Apply Warm Light

Clean your brush thoroughly. Mix white with a tiny bit of yellow ochre to create the lightest, warmest light. Apply this to the left side of the seagull's head to suggest warm sunlight.

Blend into Cool Light

With one smooth brush stroke, gently blend the warm light into the cooler light on the back of the head, reflecting the blue of the sky.

Highlight the Wing

Apply the warm light mixture to the front of the wing only. Avoid extending it along the entire wing to maintain variety and realism, as the wing curves away from the light.

Smooth Paint Blobs

Flatten any paint blobs casting shadows with your brush to eliminate unwanted dark spots and enhance the warm highlight.

PRO TIP

Use a mahl stick to steady your hand for precise details.

22 Foreground Water Details



Add Foreground Water Details

Begin by lightly adding details to the water in the foreground. Focus on capturing the essence of the water without overworking it. Aim to suggest movement and reflections without drawing every ripple.

Capture the Seagull's Interaction

Emphasize the moment where the seagull's foot touches the water, creating a small splash. This detail adds dynamism to the scene and highlights the seagull's presence.

PRO TIP

Focus on capturing the sensation of water rather than detailing every ripple to maintain a painterly feel.

23 Final Touches and Adjustments



Add Final Details

Use a rag to create a blurry effect and add small sparkles to suggest details without over-defining them. This approach maintains a painterly feel and avoids spelling out every ripple.

Intensify the Background

Mix blue, red, and white to create a dark mixture. Apply it to the background to enhance contrast, making the bird appear lighter. Thin the paint with walnut oil medium for a smoother application.

Create Motion with Brushwork

Use a flicking motion with the brush to create a sense of motion and texture. Under-mix the paint on the palette to achieve varied color effects, incorporating red and blue for interest.

Enhance Color Interest

Add more intense blue to the top area to introduce color interest in a grey section. Break the edge of the wing to convey motion, even if it means altering detailed work.

PRO TIP

Under-mix paint on the palette to achieve interesting color effects and texture.

24 Foreground and Background Balance



Use a Palette Knife

Experiment with a palette knife or other non-brush tools to create unique marks. This adds interest and texture to your painting, enhancing its expressiveness.

Vary Your Brush Grip

Change your grip on the brush to alter the stroke quality. A heavy-handed grip results in stronger, heavier strokes, while a controlled grip allows for more precision.

Focus on Abstract Shapes

Consider the painting as an abstract composition of shapes, colors, and textures. Squint at the painting to better see these elements and ask yourself what the painting needs.

Highlight the Bird

Add light in front of the bird and a subtle horizon line to draw attention to its form and motion. This spotlight effect helps accentuate the bird's presence.

Create Foreground Contrast

Mix yellow ochre with burnt sienna for a warm, punchy color in the foreground. This warmth contrasts with the cool grays, helping the foreground come forward and enhancing depth.

PRO TIP

Use a large brush to carve intricate shapes into the background, creating detailed forms without needing a small brush.

25 Edge Variety and Softening



Soften Edges Around the Bird

Focus on softening some of the edges around the bird to create variety. This will enhance the contrast with the crisp edge at the top of the tail. Gently lose the edge below to balance the composition.

Add Edge Variation

Introduce variation by softening the edge on the lower part of the bird. This will help to create a dynamic and interesting outline.

Sharpen the Front Edge

Tidy up and sharpen the front edge of the bird slightly. This contrast will draw attention to the bird's forward-facing features.

Highlight the Beak

Add a glistening spot of water on the tip of the bird's beak. This suggests the bird has just dipped into the water, adding a lively detail to the scene.

Focus on the Face

Ensure the face details are crisp and accurately placed. This is crucial for capturing the bird's character and expression.

PRO TIP

Soften some edges around the bird to create contrast with sharper areas, enhancing the overall dynamic of the painting.

26 Final Details and Corrections



Refine Edges and Details

Add crisp edges to important areas like the splash and the seagull's neck. Ensure a soft transition in some areas to create contrast with sharp edges. This will enhance the painting's depth and interest.

Add Color Accents

Introduce pure blue and white accents on the seagull's back for color variation. These small notes act like grace notes in music, adding subtle interest to the composition.

Enhance Foreground Definition

Focus on adding more care and detail in the foreground. Sharpen edges behind the leg and add a crisp red detail to avoid any unintended textures.

Create Splash Effect

Consider how light interacts with the splash. Add glints of light at the front and bottom curve, and introduce a bit of transparency in the water to suggest movement and realism.

Correct Wing and Add Final Touches

Ensure the wing is not clipped to maintain the seagull's ability to fly. Add a calligraphic squiggle with the reflection of the leg as a finishing touch.

PRO TIP

Use small color accents like pure blue and white to add subtle interest and variation to your painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey with 'The Dancing Seagull' by preparing your materials and palette. Secure your canvas and choose brushes that suit both broad strokes and fine details. A limited palette will simplify your color mixing and enhance the harmony of your painting. Begin by establishing the background with bold, dark tones, and use mediums to ensure smooth application and effective composition.

As you progress, focus on blocking in large shapes and maintaining a dynamic texture. Use expressive brushwork to draw the seagull, capturing its form with both precision and gestural freedom. Balance your composition with contrasting colors and carefully consider the proportions of light and dark areas to create visual interest. Introduce texture with varied brushstrokes and tissue techniques to add depth and dimension.

In the final stages, refine your painting by adding highlights and details with a painterly touch. Use warm and cool tones to create contrast and guide the viewer's eye. Maintain focus on the overall impression rather than exact replication, allowing your artistic expression to shine. With each stroke, aim to capture the essence of the scene, ensuring your painting remains lively and engaging.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use a limited palette to simplify color mixing and enhance harmony.
- Apply walnut alkyde medium for smoother application in darks and mid values.
- Squint at your reference to focus on large shapes and simplify your process.
- Start curves with straight edges to ensure accuracy before refining them.
- Mix light grays in advance to speed up your painting process.
- Avoid using pure white everywhere to maintain focus and lead the viewer's eye.
- Use varied brushstrokes to create texture and avoid a photographic look.
- Scumble a bit of white or bluish-grey to lighten overly dark shadows.



"The Dancing Seagull" 15x15" Oil on Canvas

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.

“Seagull in pastel” by Ann Olsson



Seagull in pastel

Exciting colour! Niiice. I'd like to see more detail in the face and beak, but I expect that with pastels you'd need to use a bigger piece of paper to achieve that. I'd also hope to see a sharper edge along the face since that's the focal point. Otherwise, lovely gestural colourful work. Keep at it!

"1st lesson "Seagull"" by Susan Darienzo



1st lesson "Seagull"

Hey Susan this is beautiful gestural work! I love the contrast of the loose fluid brushwork with the accurate drawing of the bird shape. I'd be tempted to glaze the ground plane a little darker with blue so that the highlights there don't compete so much with those on the gull. Be mindful of reflections off the paint when photographing your work - wear a dark top, take the photo at more of an angle from the top and then use straighten it out using the cropping/perspective tools on your phone or image software. Great work!

“Dancing Seagull - not as painterly as yours I'm afraid, but I kind of like it nevertheless. Will try harder next time!” by **Nancy Murray**



Dancing Seagull - not as painterly as yours I'm afraid, but I kind of like it nevertheless. Will try harder next time!

Thanks Nancy, you're right it could be more painterly by losing the gull's edges in some places , but it's got some great qualities all the same. Bold brushwork, small forays into texture variety, strong colour and decent value control - that is, you modelled the bird's form nicely with various greys. The top of the head could do with a white highlight however. That vertical white line in the reflection is distracting. This'll look great in a frame. Keep pushing!