



Mastering Sunsets

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/122-Mastering-Sunsets>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this project, I invite you to explore the captivating world of color harmony, a crucial element in painting stunning sunsets. We'll dive into the use of the gamut mask tool, which will guide us in creating color strings that bring our paintings to life. As we paint, we'll delve into the fascinating interplay of light and water, uncovering the special effects that can transform a scene into something truly magical. I'll also share techniques for brushwork that can enhance the beauty of a sunset, making it more vivid and expressive. By considering the overall color scheme and balancing vibrant hues with subdued tones, we can create striking contrasts that highlight the brilliance of the sunset. This chapter is designed to deepen your understanding of color and light, empowering you to capture the essence of a sunset with confidence and creativity.



"Mastering Sunsets" by Richard Robinson.



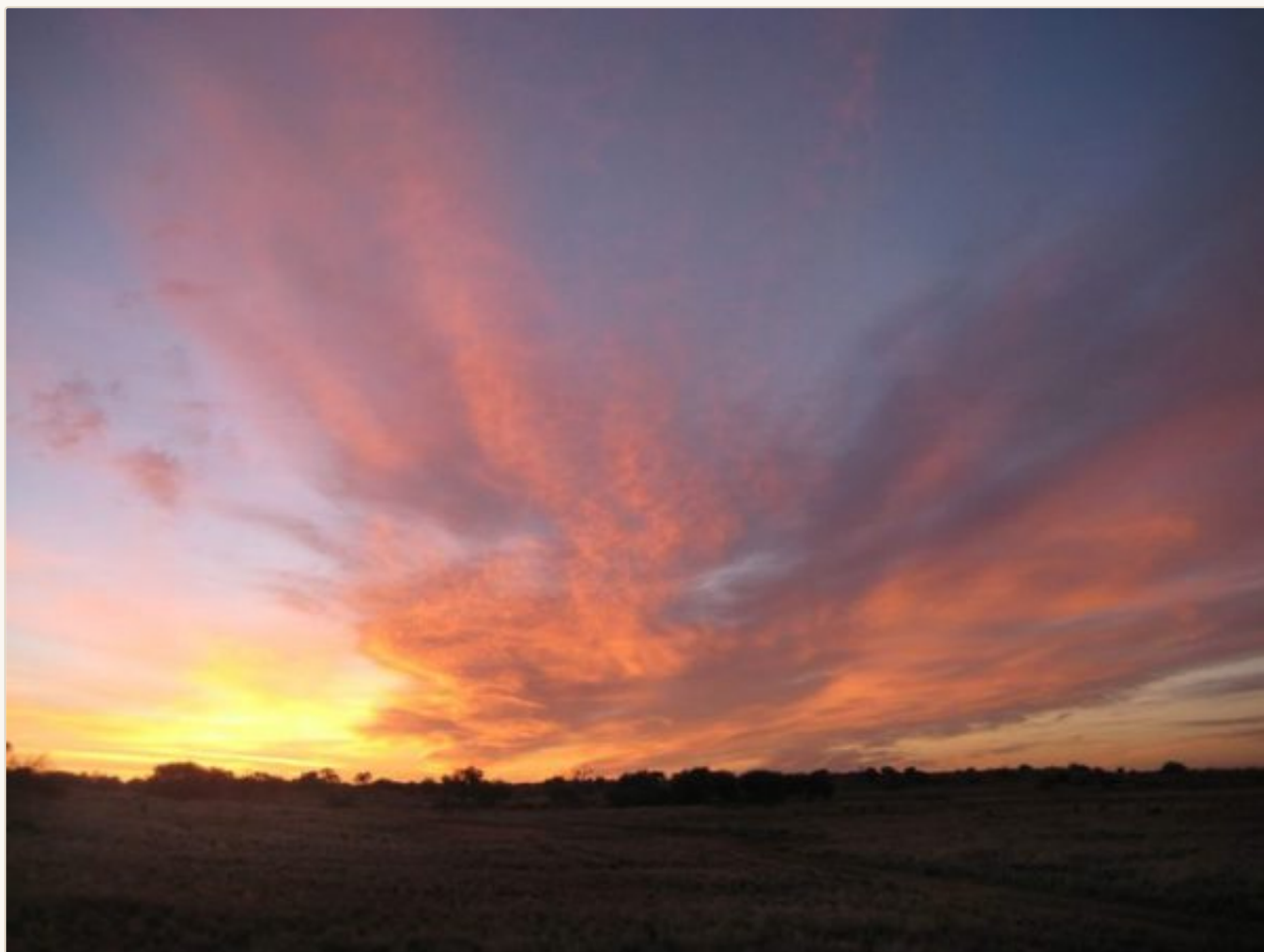
REFERENCE PHOTO 1

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

- Alla Prima means 'at once', better known as the wet in wet technique. This is how you get the painting looking so fluid and passionate.

1 Sunset Painting Challenges



Balance Vibrant and Subdued Colors

Consider the overall color scheme of your sunset painting. While vibrant colors are tempting, incorporating a good amount of grey or subdued tones can create a beautiful contrast and make the vibrant colors stand out more effectively.

PRO TIP

Use grey tones to balance and enhance the vibrancy of your sunset colors.

2 Complementary Colour Schemes



Identify Complementary Colors

Observe the natural complementary colors present in a sunset, such as yellow and violet. These colors naturally enhance each other and create a harmonious balance.

Choose a Complementary Scheme

Select a complementary color scheme for your sunset painting. Consider using yellow and violet, blue and orange, or red and green to achieve a simple yet effective color harmony.

Experiment with Variations

Try combining different complementary pairs, like yellow, orange, and blue-violet, to find the scheme that best captures the mood and vibrancy of your sunset scene.

PRO TIP

Use complementary colors to naturally enhance and balance your sunset painting.

3 Choosing a Subject



Select a Subject

Choose a subject that captures the essence of a sunset. Consider a location with spectacular colors, like Garapotter, where the setting sun creates a vibrant display.

Gather Reference Materials

Use your memory and any available photos to recall the scene's colors and composition. These references will help you recreate the sunset's beauty in your painting.

PRO TIP

Choose a subject with dynamic elements, such as waves, to add interest to your sunset painting.

4 Gamut Mask Tool and Colour Strings



Create Thumbnail Sketches

Work on thumbnail sketches to explore different design ideas. Focus on composition and the overall feel of the painting.

Conduct a Value Study

Do a small value study to work out some of the details. This will help you understand the light and dark areas of your painting.

Use the Gamut Mask Tool

Map out two different complementary colour schemes using the gamut mask tool. Consider using blue violet and yellow orange for one scheme, and blue green and red orange for the other.

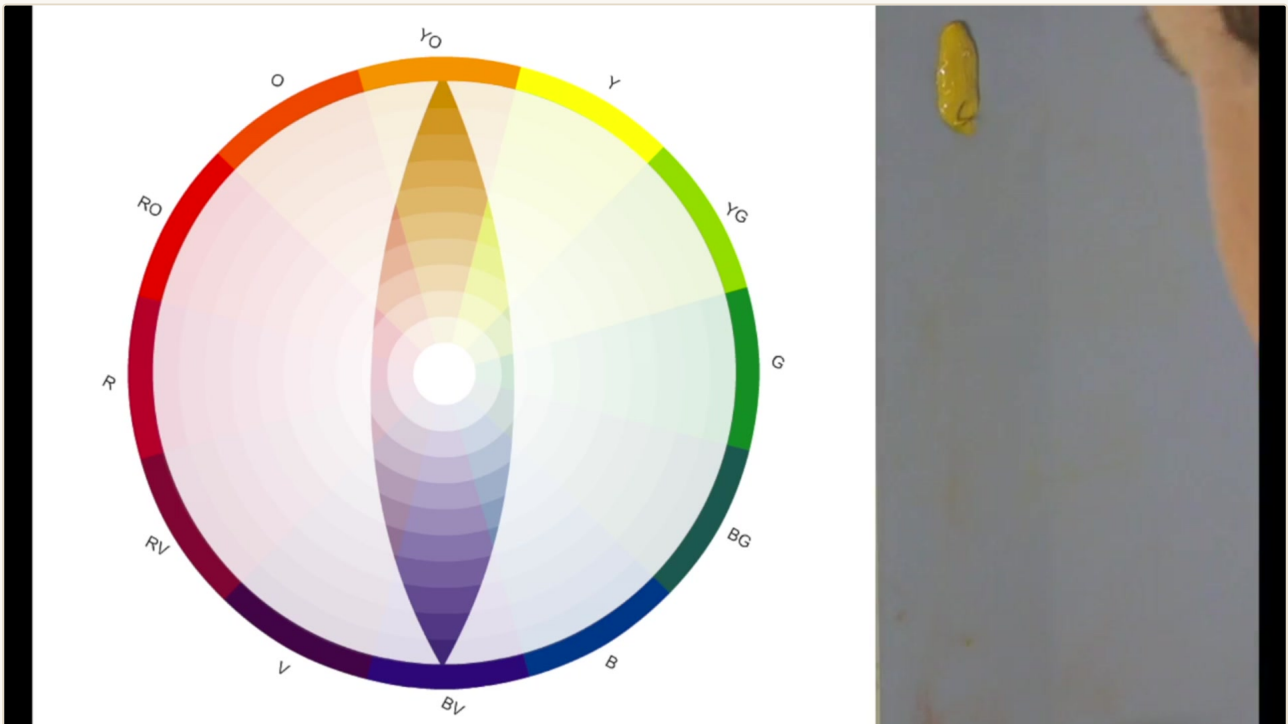
Adjust Chroma for Vibrancy

Reduce the chroma by about a third to achieve a moderately vibrant look. This adjustment adds more grey into the colour scheme, balancing the vibrancy.

PRO TIP

Use the gamut mask tool to explore different complementary colour schemes for your painting.

5 Mixing Colour Strings



Mix the Blue-Violet String

Combine ultramarine blue, a little pyrrole red, and magenta to create a blue-violet. Add yellow ochre to grey it down. Mix a color string of five values by adding white incrementally, creating steps from nearly black to nearly white.

Adjust Yellow Ochre for Dark Values

Position yellow ochre in the mid-value range. Darken it by adding a little dark blue-violet, red, and ultramarine blue. Ensure the color doesn't become too grey by balancing with red.

Create the Yellow Ochre String

Add more dark blue-violet and red to further darken the yellow ochre, matching the dark value of the blue-violet. Clean the palette and add white to the yellow ochre to create lighter values, completing the string.

PRO TIP

Balance the addition of red to prevent the color from becoming too grey when darkening yellow ochre.

6 Colour Studies



Create a Colour Study

Using your chosen colours and white, create a small 5-inch square colour study. Base this study on any sketches you have done previously. This exercise helps you understand the interaction of colours.

Experiment with Colour Strings

Mix a new set of colour strings using red, orange, blue, and green. Create a small colour study with these new mixes to explore different colour interactions.

Choose a Colour Scheme

Decide on a colour scheme, such as yellow, orange, blue, and violet. This choice will guide your painting and help you focus on specific colour relationships.

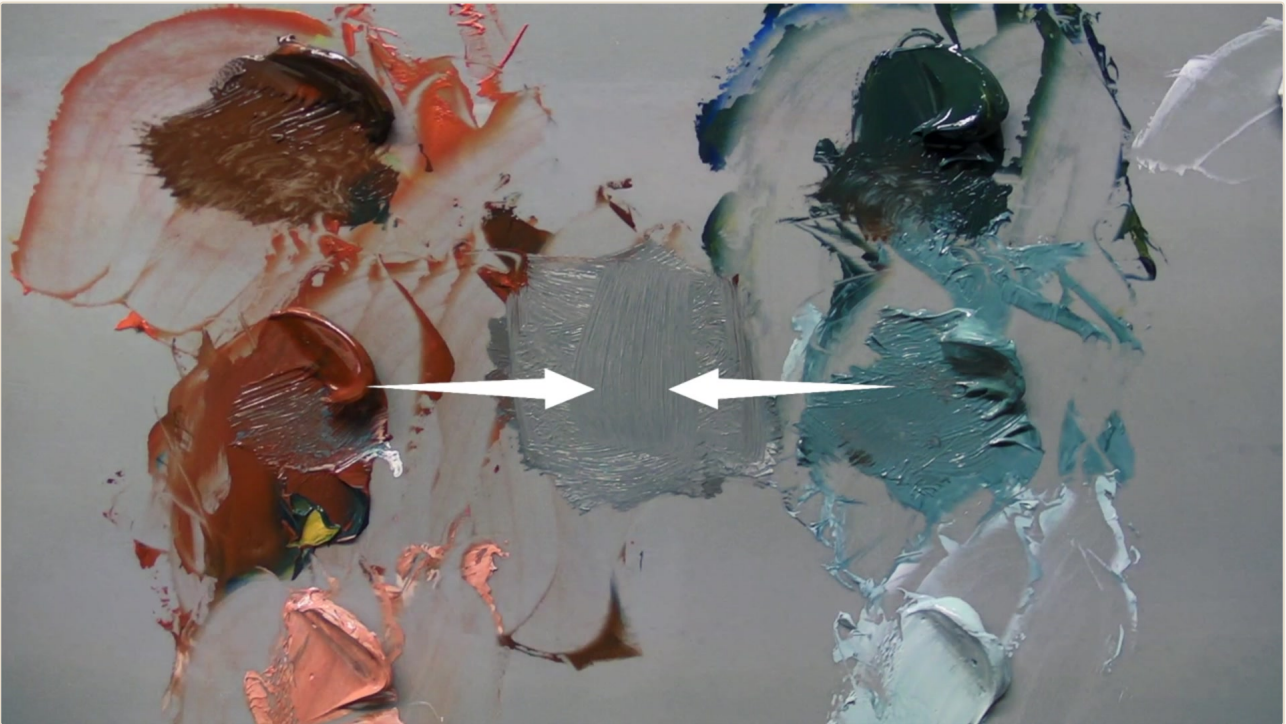
Explore Multiple Studies

If you have the patience, create more than two colour studies. Each study will teach you more about colour and value, especially how to gray down a colour by adding its complement.

PRO TIP

Experiment with different colour schemes to deepen your understanding of colour interactions.

7 Preparing the Canvas



Tone the Canvas

Prepare your canvas by toning it with yellow ochre. Use water if you're working with water mixable oils or acrylics. For standard oils, use odorless solvents or turpentine. Apply the tone evenly across the canvas.

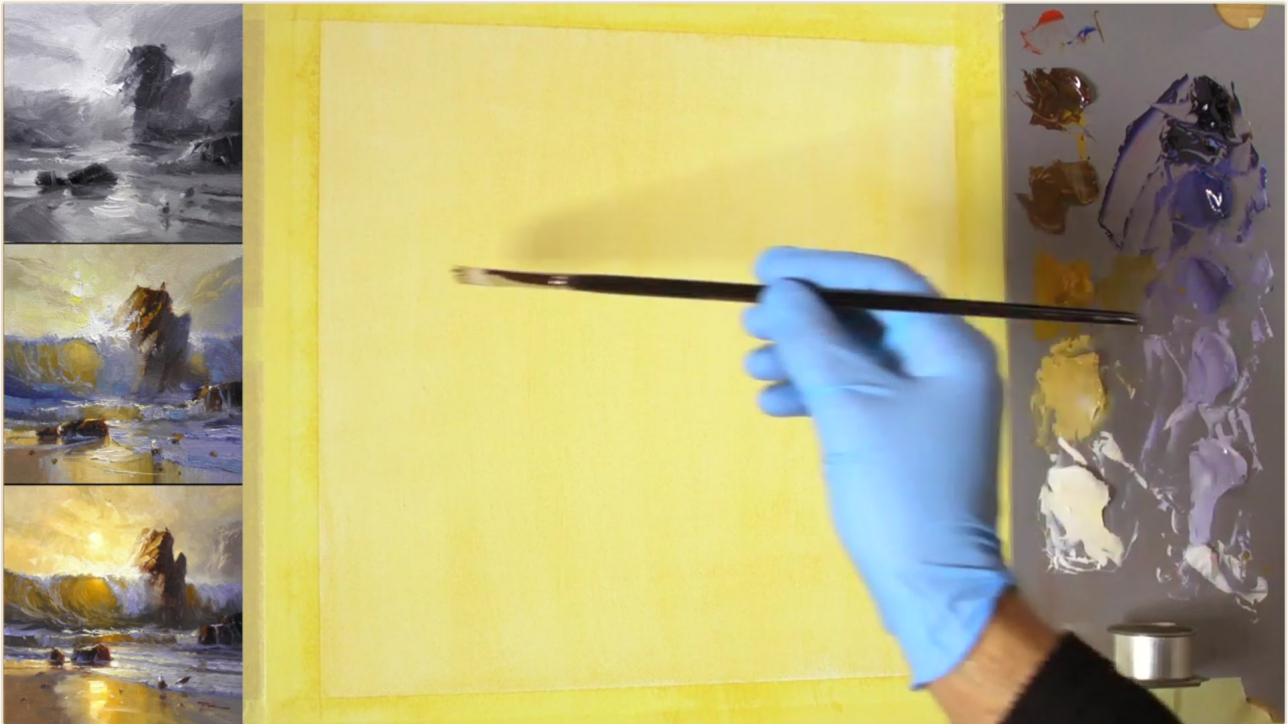
Wipe the Canvas

Take a lint-free paper towel and gently wipe down the entire canvas. This will ensure a smooth, even surface and remove any excess tone.

PRO TIP

Use a lint-free paper towel to wipe the canvas for a smooth finish.

8 Sketching the Composition



Start the Sketch

Use yellow ochre and a small brush to begin your sketch. Start with the top of the wave, angling it slightly downwards to indicate it's slightly overhead.

Position the Horizon

Draw a straight line below the top of the wave to represent the horizon. This will help establish the perspective of your composition.

Sketch the Next Wave

Draw the top of the next wave below eye level, angling it upwards towards the horizon. This creates depth and perspective in your scene.

Add the Glowing Area and Sun

Identify the glowing area in the wave where the sun will be positioned directly above. This will serve as the center of focus.

Incorporate Rocks and Reflections

Sketch in the rocks, ensuring they and the sun, sky, and waves reflect into the water and wet sand. This adds realism and cohesion to the scene.

Focus on Variety

Ensure variety in the size, shape, and angle of the rocks and waveforms. Also, vary the spacing between objects to create a dynamic composition.

PRO TIP

Make sure major lines in your sketch lead the eye back to the glowing spot in the wave, the center of focus.

9 Painting the Darks and Shadows



Start with the Darks

Use a larger brush and dip it in walnut oil. Begin painting the dark areas with a thinner application, incorporating more walnut oil or painting medium. This will allow the lights to be applied thicker and juicier later.

Add Reflections and Variation

Paint the reflections for the rocks, knowing these will be covered with other colors later. Introduce dark blue violet into the rocks to create color variation.

Paint Shadowy Areas

Add a bit of the next lightest color for the dark shadowy area at the base of the wave. Mix in a little yellow ochre to vary the color and continue painting dark shadowy water areas.

Prepare for Lighter Values

Extend the dark areas beyond what is needed, as you will paint back into these with the next lightest value. Add more yellow ochre and start working color into the face of the wave.

PRO TIP

Use more walnut oil in the darks to keep them thinner, allowing for thicker, juicier lights later.

10 Building the Wave and Foam



Build the Glowing Wave

Use pure yellow ochre to gradually build up the glowing area of the wave. Apply a slightly darker version for the next gap in the wave to create depth. This will help define the smaller wave face in the mid-ground.

Add Foam in Shadow

Apply a mid-value blue violet to paint the foam in shadow. Remember, the wave acts like a wall blocking light, with some light passing through thinner sections. This means the foam on this side of the wave is in shadow.

Paint the Glowing Rock

Use yellow ochre to paint a glowing area on the rock. Focus on making the front of the rock very warm and light, allowing it to merge with the glowing area around the sun.

PRO TIP

Use pure yellow ochre to gradually build up glowing areas, enhancing the warmth and light in your painting.

11 Painting Reflections and Light



Paint the Rock

Use yellow ochre to paint a glowing area on the rock. Ensure the front of the rock is very warm and light to merge with the glowing area around the sun. This will enhance the sun's appearance as a strong light source.

Darken Foam and Shadow

Darken the foam and shadow on the wave's end further from the sun. Use the same color to suggest a distant cliff obscured by atmosphere.

Reflect Cooler Colors

Add a little of the color to the darkest brown to suggest the right side of the rock reflecting cooler colors in the distance.

Paint Foam and Water

Use the same color as the base for the foam and water in the foreground. Lighten it as it approaches the area where the sun will be reflected.

Add Strong Reflection

Paint a stronger reflection in the wet sand using yellow ochre to capture the sunlight's intensity.

PRO TIP

Lighten the color as it approaches the area where the sun will be reflected to enhance the effect of sunlight.

12 Background and Sky



Paint Reflections in Wet Sand

Use yellow ochre to paint the stronger reflection in the wet sand. Apply vertical strokes first, then finish with a few horizontal strokes to create the appearance of wet sand reflecting the sky. Ensure the reflection gets darker and cooler as it moves away from the sun.

Mix Warm Grey for Distant Cliff

Mix a cool and a warm color together to create a warm grey. This should be slightly lighter than the blue-violet grey already on the canvas. This helps the distant cliff merge with the sun glow in the background.

Paint the Sky Behind the Cliff

Go slightly lighter and warmer with your mix to paint the sky behind the cliff. This will help the sky recede into the background, allowing the rock and splash to be the focal points.

Ensure Background Elements Recede

Keep the values of background elements close together and use analogous colors. This will help them blend into the background and not compete with the main focus of the painting.

PRO TIP

Use analogous colors in the background to help elements recede and not compete with the focal point.

13 Sun and Clouds



Paint the Sun

Use nearly pure white with a touch of yellow ochre to paint the sun. This creates a bright focal point that captures the warmth of the setting sun.

Add Cooler Gray Clouds

Suggest some clouds with a cooler gray. This cooler tone will shimmer nicely next to the warm gray, creating an interesting contrast.

Warm the Clouds Near the Sun

As the clouds get closer to the sun, use a very light warm mixture with quite thick paint. This warmth mimics the effect of the sun's glow on the clouds.

PRO TIP

Use a cooler gray for clouds to create contrast with the warm gray, enhancing the shimmering effect.

14 Foam Spray and Mist



Block in Foam Spray

Use a very light warm mixture with quite thick paint to block in some of the foam spray coming off the top of the wave. This will add a dynamic and lively element to your painting.

Add Mist to the Background

Work a slightly greyer version of the foam spray mixture into the background. This represents the soft mist coming off the top of the wave, adding depth and atmosphere to your scene.

PRO TIP

Use a thicker paint consistency for the foam spray to create a more textured and realistic effect.

15 Wave Details and Principles



Add Shadow Line on Wave

Paint a shadow line across the top of the wave. This is because the sun is behind the wave, causing the light to travel through more water as the wave curls over towards you. Use this principle to create a realistic effect in this lighting situation.

PRO TIP

Use the shadow line to emphasize the wave's curl and enhance the lighting effect.

16 Extending the Colour Scheme



Extend the Colour Scheme

Add primary yellow or cadmium yellow to your palette. Use this intense color for the corona area directly around the sun. This will enhance the vibrancy and realism of the sunset.

Plan for Reflections

Prepare to use the same yellow in the reflection of the sun on the wet sand. This consistency will tie the elements of your painting together and create a cohesive look.

PRO TIP

Use cadmium yellow to highlight the sun's corona and its reflection for a vibrant sunset effect.

17 Adding Texture and Highlights



Enhance the Wave's Glow

Intensify the glowing area in the wave by adding smooth curling water. This adds interest and variation instead of having all foam.

Add Highlights to Wet Rocks

Apply light paint thickly on the wet rocks to reflect sunlight effectively. Darken the paint slightly as it moves away from the sun to create depth.

Create Speckled Texture

Lightly graze the brush across the surface to achieve a speckled texture. Avoid pressing firmly to prevent creating a smooth mark.

PRO TIP

Lightly graze the brush to achieve a speckled texture without pressing firmly.

18 Reflections and Movement



Reflect Sunlight on Water

Apply thick paint to the water in front of the wave to capture the strong, crisp reflection of the sun. This will enhance the brightness and realism of the scene.

Add Glowing Colors Inside the Wave

Mix yellow ochre with a touch of bright yellow to reflect the beautiful glowing color inside the wave. Increase the brightness as you approach the curl of the wave for a more dynamic effect.

Experiment with Foam Details

Begin adding foam crawling up the wave to create texture and interest. Use a soft synthetic brush to lightly brush over the foam, softening the edges and creating a sense of movement.

Create Movement with Vertical Blurring

Vertically blur the shapes in the foam using the soft brush. This technique will enhance the illusion of movement in the water.

Maintain a Clean Brush

When moving to a different color area, ensure your brush is as clean as possible to prevent unwanted color mixing.

PRO TIP

Use a soft synthetic brush to lightly blur foam shapes, enhancing the illusion of movement.

19 Enhancing Reflections and Rocks



Add Highlighted Spray

Use pyrol red or cadmium red to create highlighted spray coming off the back of the wave. This adds a vibrant touch to the wave and enhances the overall color scheme.

Create a Bright Reflection on the Rock

Apply strong colors to the edge of the rock to indicate a glowing effect. This will make the rock appear as if it is catching the bright light from the sun.

Align Reflections Vertically

Ensure the bright reflection in the wet sand is directly vertically in line with the sun. This alignment is crucial to avoid giving the impression of a curved surface.

Gradate Reflected Light

Brush out to the right from the strong reflection to create a natural gradation of color. This transition from strong reflected light to very little light enhances the realism of the scene.

Break Reflections with Ripples

Add little ripples of light or dark through the reflection of rocks. These ripples indicate a reflective surface, helping the viewer understand the texture and nature of the scene.

Smooth Reflections with a Palette Knife

Use a palette knife to smooth out the reflection. This technique helps achieve a more polished and realistic reflective surface.

PRO TIP

Align reflections directly vertically with the sun to maintain the illusion of a flat surface.

20 Sky and Light Adjustments



Smooth Reflections

Use a palette knife to smooth out the reflection on the water. Apply a mid to dark blue-gray to suggest cooler reflected light on the shadow sides of the rocks, helping to define their form.

Simplify and Accentuate

Simplify the background area with a dark grayish green and add a few dark accents to the rocks. This will help the area sit back in space.

Add Highlights

Apply faint highlights to the tops of the cliffs and the fronts of the rock faces. Use a tiny bit of orange on the fronts to create a subtle difference from the tops.

Enhance Glow

Add a strong bit of color to the middle of the glowing area directly under the sun to make the wave look translucent. Lighten the reflection in the foreground sand to match the glowing sky.

Create Shimmering Effect

Add a cool grey against the warm grey in the sky to create a shimmering effect. Darken the cliff slightly to bring it forward and reshape the cliffs as needed. Use a cooler gray in the sky, lessening as it approaches the sun, to enhance the sun's brightness and warmth by comparison.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to smooth reflections and add texture to your painting.

21 Final Details and Highlights



Enhance Sun's Glow

Add a few light snippets of clouds around the sun to make it appear lighter, brighter, and warmer by comparison. This adds interest and depth to the sky.

Apply Thick Highlights

Use really thick paint for highlights, allowing the paint to drag off onto the painting without the bristles touching the surface. This technique creates a vibrant, textured effect.

Paint Seagulls and Shadows

Add seagulls on the beach with minimal brush strokes to avoid muddying the colors. Include a little bit of warm light on one side of the seagulls and a soft dark vertical reflection.

Add Beach Details

Paint a faint cast shadow across the sand and include some shells or little rocks. Ensure that these elements in the strong sun glow area take on some of that warm color.

PRO TIP

Use thick paint for highlights to create a vibrant texture without letting the brush bristles touch the canvas.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your sunset painting journey by thoughtfully considering your color scheme. Balance vibrant hues with subdued tones to create a striking contrast that highlights the sunset's natural beauty. Embrace complementary colors like yellow and violet to enhance harmony and depth in your scene. Choose a subject that captures the essence of a sunset, using your memory and references to guide your composition.

As you progress, explore different color schemes using tools like the gamut mask to refine your palette. Mix color strings to achieve a range of values, ensuring your colors remain vibrant yet balanced. Prepare your canvas with a smooth, toned surface to set the stage for your composition. Sketch your scene with attention to perspective and focal points, guiding the viewer's eye to the glowing heart of your sunset.

In the final stages, focus on painting the darks and shadows with a thinner application, allowing for thicker, more vibrant lights later. Build up the wave and foam with careful attention to light and shadow, enhancing the realism of your scene. Add texture and highlights to capture the dynamic movement of water and the brilliance of the setting sun. Use thick, vibrant strokes to convey the energy and warmth of a sunset, creating a cohesive and captivating painting.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use grey tones to balance and enhance the vibrancy of your sunset colors.
- Use complementary colors to naturally enhance and balance your sunset painting.
- Choose a subject with dynamic elements, such as waves, to add interest to your sunset painting.
- Use the gamut mask tool to explore different complementary color schemes for your painting.
- Balance the addition of red to prevent the color from becoming too grey when darkening yellow ochre.
- Experiment with different color schemes to deepen your understanding of color interactions.
- Use a lint-free paper towel to wipe the canvas for a smooth finish.
- Make sure major lines in your sketch lead the eye back to the glowing spot in the wave, the center of focus.



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