



Mountain River

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/234-Mountain-River>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we embark on a journey to capture the breathtaking beauty of the Rees Valley River in New Zealand, a scene that offers endless inspiration for any painter. As we explore this mountain river landscape, you'll learn to embrace the power of variety to create a painting that captivates and endures. Together, we'll delve into the art of designing around a central idea, using a simple palette and expressive brushwork to bring your vision to life. You'll discover how to highlight your focal point by thoughtfully cropping the scene and employing contrast to draw the viewer's eye. This lesson emphasizes the importance of variety in your composition, ensuring your painting holds the viewer's attention and stands the test of time. By the end of this chapter, you'll have a deeper understanding of how to create a painting that not only adorns a wall but also invites viewers to lose themselves in its depths, time and time again. Enjoy the process, and I look forward to seeing your interpretation of this stunning landscape.



The Rees River, New Zealand

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
- Phthalo Blue
- Alizarine Crimson
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- 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 Design Decisions



Choose Your Focus

Decide what element of the scene captivates you the most. This will guide your composition and ensure your painting has a clear focal point.

Crop the Scene

Select a portion of the scene that interests you. Cropping helps simplify the composition and emphasizes your chosen focal point.

Balance Elements

Consider how other elements, like mountains, support your focal point. Avoid giving too much emphasis to subsidiary elements to maintain focus on your main subject.

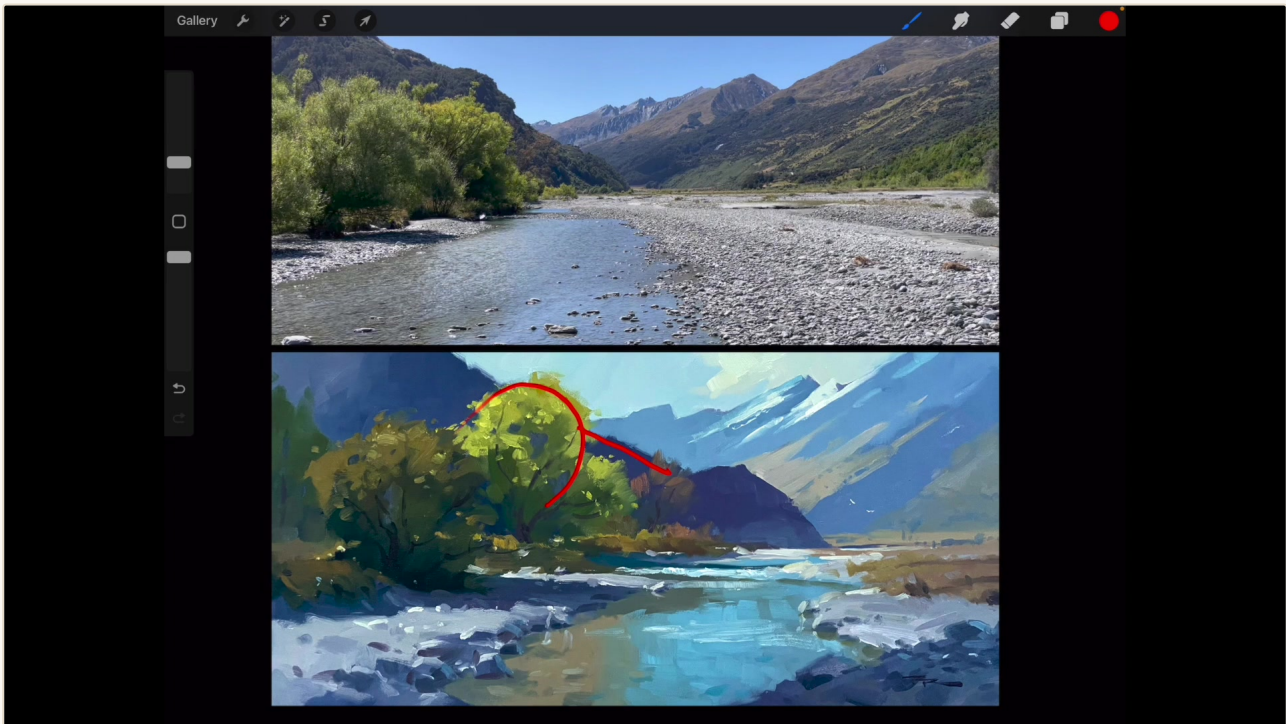
Create Contrast

Use contrast to highlight your focal point. For example, place a light object against a dark background to make it stand out and draw the viewer's eye.

PRO TIP

Use contrast effectively to highlight your focal point and draw attention to it.

2 Cropping and Composition



Determine the Center of Interest

Identify the main focal point of your painting. In this scene, the tree breaking the dark contrasting line serves as the center of interest.

Crop the Scene

Crop the scene to focus on the center of interest. Remove unnecessary elements like excessive sky or lead-in areas. Decide whether to crop tightly or leave more space around the focal point based on your personal design preference.

Adjust Background Shapes

Modify the shapes in the background if needed to add interest and guide the viewer's eye through the painting. Feel free to change natural shapes that aren't engaging enough.

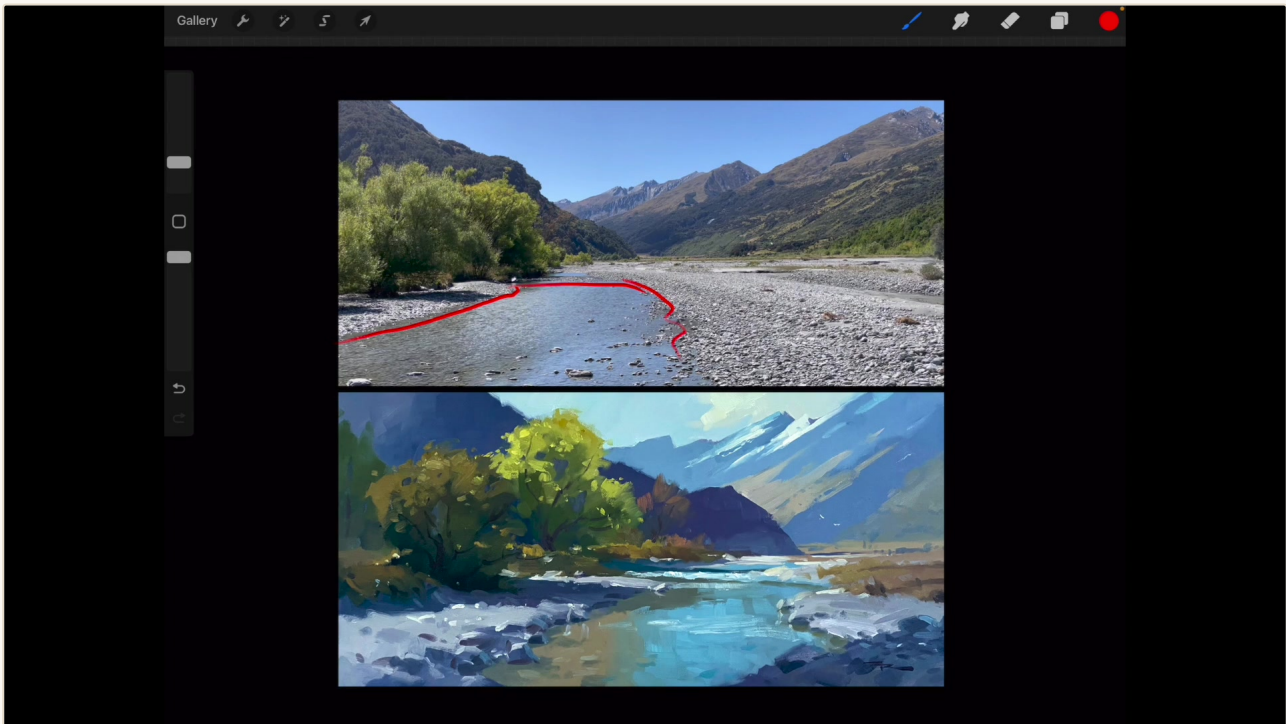
Refine the River Line

Simplify or alter the river line to enhance the composition. A broken or simple line can be adjusted in the painting for better visual flow.

PRO TIP

Crop the scene to highlight your center of interest, removing unnecessary elements.

3 Light and Shadow Adjustments



Enhance River Shape

Break the line of the river to create a more interesting shape. Add a shadow to form a big triangle pointing into the center of the scene.

Adjust Light Angle

Lower the angle of the Sun to extend the shadows, adding dynamism to the scene. Position the Sun more to the left side of the trees to simplify the background and highlight the tree as the center of interest.

Simplify Background

Place the background in shadow, removing unnecessary details to create a blank stage for the main tree. Use spot lighting in a few areas to create dynamic shapes and guide the viewer's eye.

Add Foreground Shadows

Cast small shadows across the foreground to direct the viewer's eye toward the light and contrast in the center of the painting.

Adjust Tree Colors

Make one tree a warmer green and another a cooler green to exaggerate natural differences and create distance. Highlight a small autumnal tree with color contrast to lead the eye into the painting.

PRO TIP

Use color temperature differences to create depth and guide the viewer's eye through the painting.

4 Canvas and Materials



Select Your Canvas

Choose a 13 by 27 inch canvas for this painting. Use Frederick's Ultra Smooth Canvas for a fine weave that highlights brush strokes effectively.

Understand Canvas Weave

Remember that a finer weave on a canvas will show brushstrokes more clearly. If you prefer more visible strokes, opt for a finer weave or a smooth board.

Prepare Your Paints

Lay out your M. Graham oil paints, ensuring they are ready for use in your painting session.

PRO TIP

Use a finer weave canvas to enhance the visibility of your brushstrokes.

5 Mixing White and Medium



Prepare Your Materials

Lay out your M. Graham oil paints: phthalo blue, alizarin crimson, yellow ochre, cad yellow light, and titanium white. Have a lid full of walnut oil ready as your painting medium. Gather a range of size 12 long-bristled flat brushes and a trusty palette knife.

Mix White with Medium

Drag titanium white into the center of your palette. Add walnut oil to the white by dipping into the oil and mixing it in. Aim for a consistency similar to margarine, or slightly looser, to help the paint flow better onto the canvas.

Adjust Consistency

Ensure the white paint is not too wet, maintaining enough body to hold its shape for impasto techniques. This loosened white will aid in mixing other colors, as it is used in about 80% of your mixtures.

PRO TIP

Loosen the white paint with walnut oil to improve flow and ease of mixing with other colors.

6 Mixing Neutral Grey



Mix a Neutral Grey

Start by mixing a light grey using phthalo blue and alizarin crimson. Be cautious, as phthalo blue is very powerful and can easily overpower other colors. Adjust the proportions to balance the hue.

Adjust the Hue

To achieve a neutral black, add a touch of yellow ochre to the mix. This balances the blue, red, and yellow, ensuring the color doesn't lean too much in one direction.

Test with White

Mix some white into the dark color to reveal its true hue. If the mix appears too purple, add yellow. If it's too green, add alizarin. Adjust until you achieve a balanced neutral grey.

Utilize Leftover Greys

Remember, leftover greys from previous paintings can be useful. These often form naturally on your palette and can be adjusted to create a neutral grey.

PRO TIP

When mixing a dark color, add white to reveal its true hue and adjust accordingly.

7 Safety and Glove Use



Prepare a Neutral Mid-Grey

Mix a neutral mid-grey on your palette. Use a palette that is 50% neutral mid-grey to easily compare and adjust your mixture. Save some of this grey for later use in your painting.

Lighten the Grey

Add more white to your mid-grey mixture to create a lighter grey. This lighter grey will be useful for painting rocks and for toning down other mixtures.

Wear Nitrile Gloves

Wear nitrile gloves instead of latex to avoid potential allergies. Nitrile gloves protect your skin from harmful pigments in paints, such as cadmiums.

Avoid Harmful Paint Practices

Be cautious with cadmium paints, as they contain harmful ingredients. Avoid eating while handling paints and consider using alternative pigments like pyrole yellow instead of cadmium.

PRO TIP

Use nitrile gloves to protect your skin from harmful paint pigments.

8 Sketching the Composition



Choose Your Drawing Tool

Select a long filbert brush, pencil, or charcoal to sketch your composition. Each tool offers a different feel, so choose based on your preference.

Sketch the Main Elements

Begin by sketching the main tree, which is your focal point, followed by a second tree in the foreground. Focus on creating big shapes that are similar but not identical to maintain interest.

Consider Distance and Scale

Pay attention to the distances between elements, especially in the background, to convey depth. Ensure that the scale of objects, like trees or figures, reflects their position in the landscape.

Design Dynamic Shapes

Experiment with the shapes of mountains and rivers, altering angles and lines to create dynamic, varied forms. Avoid repetitive patterns to enhance visual interest.

Add Shadows and Details

Incorporate cast shadows to define the terrain and add depth. Consider how shadows fall across objects and use them to suggest the shape of the landscape. Include small details like rocks and gaps between trees for added texture.

PRO TIP

Vary the angles and distances between elements to create a more dynamic and interesting composition.

9 Painting the Darkest Darks



Prepare Your Brush

Use a bigger brush and apply a bit of walnut oil to it. This will help in smoothly applying the darkest darks to your painting.

Apply the Darkest Darks

Jump right in with the darkest dark color, using a mix that includes a little bit of everything. Work further out than where you want the final edge to be, as you will soften it with the next darkest color.

Create Depth with Color

To step back in space, add a little gray and a touch of red to your mix. Apply this to areas where you want to create a sense of distance. Adjust the gray to ensure there is enough separation between the foreground and background.

Plan for Recession

Use slightly cooler and lighter colors to create recession in your painting. This mimics the effect of a cool light sky influencing the colors as they recede into the distance.

PRO TIP

Use cooler and lighter colors to create the illusion of distance and recession in your painting.

10 Creating Depth with Color



Prepare the Base Layer

Apply a very thin layer of paint towards the sky using big shapes. This will serve as a base for blending with a slightly lighter, warmer color.

Mix and Apply Dark Grey Purple

Mix a dark grey purple using grey, alizarin, and walnut oil. Apply this mixture onto the beach and up into the underside of the grassy bank shape, which casts a shadow onto the rocky beach.

Reflect the Sky

Add more grey to the mixture as it moves over to reflect the sky. This will give the impression that the plane, while in shadow, is curving and reflecting the cool sky.

Utilize Pre-Mixed Colors

Look for areas in the painting where you can use the same color on your brush. This will speed up your painting process and save time on mixing later.

Shade the Rocks

Identify where the sun is coming from and shade the side of the rocks that is in shadow. As the rocks curve towards the water, add more shadow using the pre-mixed grey.

PRO TIP

Use pre-mixed colors in multiple areas to save time and maintain color harmony.

11 Painting Shadows and Reflections



Mix Shadow Colors

Take a gray and add a little phthalo blue to it. This will create a cooler, bluer tone for the shadows as they recede into the background.

Prepare Hill Color

While working with these colors, mix a shade for the hill in the background. Adjust the phthalo blue to avoid overpowering the mixture.

Paint Soft Edges

Paint the tree over the thin paint at the edge of the trees. Allow the paint from the tree to blend softly into the background, creating soft edges.

Adjust for Light Source

Consider the light source when painting. If the sun is coming from one side, make that area lighter by adding light gray. For a warm light effect, incorporate warm colors like alizarin and yellow ochre to suggest warmth in the background.

Establish Cool Darks

Focus on getting the cool darks in place as they form the foundation of the painting. This is crucial outdoors where shadow shapes change quickly, but it's also beneficial in the studio.

PRO TIP

Wear dark clothing while painting to reduce glare and see your colors more clearly.

12 Capturing Plein Air Feel



Set a Timer

Set a timer for yourself to mimic the time constraints of plein air painting. This helps create a sense of urgency and spontaneity in your work.

Embrace Time Limits

Allow yourself only the amount of time you would have outdoors to complete the painting. Once the timer goes off, stop painting to maintain the expressive quality.

PRO TIP

Use a timer to capture the passionate effect of plein air painting in the studio.

13 Painting Distant Hills



Mix Distant Hill Color

Take a light grey and add phthalo blue with a touch of red or alizarin crimson. Aim for a cooler, lighter tone to suggest distance. Ensure the mix is a mid-grey, around 50% grey, to maintain the right value for distant hills.

PRO TIP

When painting outdoors, remember that your painting will appear lighter due to sunlight. Adjust your values accordingly to ensure it looks right indoors.

14 Outdoor Painting Tips



Adjust for Lighting Differences

Paint your outdoor scene slightly lighter than you want it to appear indoors. This compensates for the brighter outdoor light, ensuring it looks good inside.

Position Your Canvas

Set up your canvas in the shade with the sun behind it. This prevents glare and helps you see the true colors and values of your painting.

PRO TIP

Paint lighter outdoors to account for the difference in lighting when viewed indoors.

15 Controlling the Painting Process



Adjust Distance with Color

Make the distant mountain appear further away by lightening and cooling the color. This helps create depth in your painting, distinguishing it from closer elements.

Decide on Edge Variety

Consider the type of edges you want to create. Use soft edges at the edge of trees for a gentle transition and crisp edges on the top of the hill for clarity. This adds variety and interest to your painting.

Embrace Creative Control

Think beyond simply copying a photograph. Focus on how to add variety and beauty to your painting. This mindset allows you to take control and create a unique piece of art.

PRO TIP

Use a combination of soft and crisp edges to add variety and interest to your painting.

16 Adding Sunlit Areas



Identify Sunlit Areas

Observe the gaps left on the mountains for sunlit areas and snow. These areas will create contrast against the shadowed parts, enhancing depth and interest in your painting.

Create Dynamic Shapes

Use the light areas to form dynamic shapes that mimic the natural formations of the mountains. These shapes should be similar to those already present in your painting to maintain consistency and realism.

PRO TIP

Contrast sunlit areas with shadows to enhance depth and create dynamic shapes.

17 Midtones and Soft Transitions



Mix a Dark Grey-Green

Use yellow ochre to mix a dark grey-green. You can gray it down with red, the complement of green, for a balanced tone. This mixture will serve as the base for soft transitions.

Create Soft Transitions

Apply the dark grey-green to create a soft transition from the darkest dark to the next lightest dark. Focus on smooth, gradual changes in tone to prepare for later details like branches.

Lighten with Yellow Ochre

Lighten the mixture by adding more yellow ochre. This will help transition into areas where the sun touches the tree, maintaining soft edges throughout.

Add Warmth

Introduce a little more warmth to the mixture. Keep the transitions soft and avoid hard edges for now, as these will be added later.

Maintain Thin Layers

Ensure the paint layer remains thin. This allows the thicker lights to be applied on top later without conflict, ensuring they lay down smoothly.

PRO TIP

Use red to gray down the green, as it is the complementary color, creating a balanced tone.

18 Painting Grasses and Trees



Warm Up the Grasses

Brush down into the grassy area with large, curvy brushstrokes to create the feel of clumps of grass. Use a mix of light gray to add dimension and move back in space. Add some white to the mix to lighten and thicken the paint, allowing it to catch the light and sparkle.

Create Brushstroke Variety

Treat your brushstrokes like a family, with a couple of large strokes and smaller ones to add variety. Apply thick paint to enhance the texture and light-catching quality. Avoid creating repetitive patterns to maintain a natural look.

Adjust Color Temperature

Cool down the color by adding a touch of phthalo, but be cautious as it is very powerful. Balance the color by graying it down if necessary to match the distance. Use a darker green to bridge the gap between the lighter and darker areas.

Differentiate Tree Colors

Use artistic license to cool down one tree and warm up another, even if they appear similar in reality. This helps create depth as colors become lighter and cooler in the distance. Add a little blue to the shadowed tree to prevent it from standing out too much.

Eliminate Canvas White

Scrub out any white bits of the canvas showing through to maintain a cohesive look. Consider toning the canvas with a light gray or tan before starting to avoid the glare of white canvas.

PRO TIP

Avoid creating repetitive patterns with your brushstrokes to maintain a natural look.

19 Adding Highlights and Details



Prepare a Light Green Mix

Mix a light green using yellow and light grey. Ensure the paint is thick and impasto to create a punchy highlight for the tree, which is your center of interest.

Apply Varied Brushwork

Use a variety of brush shapes and marks to avoid making the shapes too obvious or man-made. Aim for an interesting shape with offshoots to add variety, using both large and small brush strokes.

Focus on Shapes and Values

Consider the importance of shapes in your painting, defined by value differences. Ensure the shapes stand out by varying the lightness and darkness, as value is key in defining them.

Add Leafy Details

Add tiny marks to suggest a leafy texture, building up smaller clumps rather than a solid shape. Use sharp and soft edges for variety and to enhance the realism of the tree.

PRO TIP

Use a variety of brush shapes and sizes to create interesting and natural-looking tree shapes.

20 Creating Dynamic Background Shapes



Create a Warm Mixture

Shift to another brush and mix a warmer color using grey for the distant tree. Ensure the mixture is fairly greyed down to create a nice contrast against the grey-purple background.

Enhance Visual Vibration

Utilize the warm versus cool contrast to create visual vibration. This effect acts like stepping stones, leading the viewer's eye deeper into the painting.

Adjust Color for Distance

Add more grey to the mixture to push it further back into the painting, emphasizing the distance between areas. This color and value change helps create depth.

Incorporate Green

Introduce a little green to the mixture to see if it works in the background. If it appears too colorful, add more grey to tone it down.

Balance Dynamic Shapes

Focus on creating dynamic shapes in the background to balance the composition. As the shapes recede into space, use slightly lighter grey to maintain depth.

PRO TIP

Use warm versus cool contrasts to create visual vibration and depth in your painting.

21 Refining Background and Distance



Refine Mountain Shape

Use the blue-gray base mountain color to carve the shape of the mountain face. Aim to create a strong patch of sunlight, but break it up slightly to avoid a solid shape.

Adjust Colors

Add some purple and a little more yellow ochre to your mix. Introduce a bit more gray to achieve muted greens and ensure they are lighter than the blue-gray to maintain depth.

Enhance Shape and Variety

Make the top of the mountain more distinct by adjusting its shape. Add variety to the lines to create a more interesting composition.

Add Details

Include a small hole through the tree to add depth and interest to the background.

PRO TIP

Ensure muted greens are lighter than the blue-gray to maintain depth and avoid them standing out too much.

22 Foreground and Shadow Details



Add Light Blue for Depth

Introduce a little light blue at the base of the painting. This creates the effect of dust and adds more distance and variety to the scene.

Enhance with Punchy Colors

Incorporate more vibrant colors to draw the eye into specific areas of the painting. Be mindful not to overuse strong colors, as this can cause the viewer's eye to wander instead of focusing on the center of interest.

Consider Composition

Decide where you want the viewer's eye to linger. Avoid placing the brightest colors in areas where you don't want attention, as this can disrupt the composition and lead the eye away from the focal point.

Mix and Apply Shadow Colors

Mix a warm shadow color to depict the shadow cast by a large tree. Consider the sun's direction and angle to determine the shadow's length and placement. Use shadows to guide the viewer's eye through the painting.

Balance Light and Shadow

Decide whether to keep certain areas in light or shadow. Maintaining some light can add interest and create shapes, such as a triangular light patch on the beach.

PRO TIP

Use light blue at the base to create depth and the effect of dust, enhancing the painting's sense of distance.

23 Painting the Water



Mix the Base Color

Combine yellow ocher with a darker grey to create a grayish light ocher tone. This will serve as the base color for the water, reflecting the riverbed in light.

Apply the Base Layer

Thinly cover the canvas with the mixed color, focusing on the areas where the riverbed is in light. This layer represents the reflection of the tree and should stop at the designated line.

Add Shadows

Carefully mix in Phthalo Blue to create a shadow color. Apply this to areas where the water is in shadow, being mindful of the intensity of the blue.

Include Rock Shadows

Identify where the rocks will cast shadows onto the water and apply the shadow color in those areas. Extend the shadows slightly to add depth and realism.

PRO TIP

Use Phthalo Blue sparingly to avoid overpowering the shadow areas with too much intensity.

24 Water Reflections and Highlights



Prepare the Base Layer

Use a brush to apply a base layer of color for the water reflections. Mix a tiny touch of phthalo blue with alizarin crimson to match the value of the surrounding area, aiming for a slightly lighter tone. Brush the color downwards, starting with a darker version and gradually lightening it.

Add Reflected Sky Color

Switch to a different brush to add the sky color reflected in the water. Use horizontal and vertical strokes to blend the colors, avoiding diagonal strokes. This will create a smooth transition and enhance the reflection effect.

Highlight the Water Surface

Create a slightly lighter and cooler version of the base color. Apply this with impasto technique, using thick paint to suggest areas where the sun catches the water, such as rapids. Focus on creating a sparkling effect on the water surface.

PRO TIP

Use horizontal and vertical strokes to blend colors smoothly for water reflections.

25 Painting Rocks and Light



Switch Brushes for Rock Highlights

Select a different brush to work on the light areas of the rocks. This will help you achieve the desired texture and detail.

Mix Light Gray with Medium

Start with a light gray color and add a little bit of walnut oil to it. This medium helps with blending and has no fumes, though it dries slowly.

PRO TIP

Consider the drying time of your medium when planning your painting sessions, especially if traveling.

26 Adding Rock Details



Adjust Bank Color

Darken the bank slightly as it is angled more towards the sun, catching less light. This subtle variation enhances the painting by showing how light affects different surfaces.

Suggest Rocks with Grey

Use the same grey to suggest the presence of rocks. This adds texture and interest to the scene without overwhelming it.

Add Light Accents

Mix in a little more white with a tiny touch of yellow ochre for a warmer light. Use this to create light accents on the rocks, enhancing their form.

Use Brush Edge for Detail

Even with a big brush, use the edge to create thin shapes for rock details. Switch to a smaller brush if it feels more comfortable for precise work.

PRO TIP

Use the edge of a big brush to create thin shapes for detailed work.

27 Underwater Rocks and Sky



Add Distant Details

In the distant areas, add a few fine details to enhance the sense of depth. Keep the lines thinner and closer together to achieve this effect.

Highlight the Rocks

Apply highlights to the rocks, but sparingly, to avoid an overly busy appearance. Just a few hints will suggest the presence of rocks effectively.

Suggest Underwater Rocks

Introduce a sense of rocks under the surface by using a color slightly darker than the surrounding water. This effect is more visible when looking through the water close to you.

Enhance Underwater Visibility

To create an even stronger impression of rocks under the water, paint the tops of some rocks slightly lighter. This adds to the illusion of depth and clarity.

PRO TIP

Use slightly darker colors to suggest rocks under the water, visible more clearly when viewed up close.

28 Painting the Sky and Clouds



Paint the Sky

Use the blues already on your palette to paint the sky. Ensure the sky is lighter and cooler than the distant mountains. Carefully carve the shapes of the mountains as you paint.

Create Edge Variations

Decide between soft and hard edges for elements like trees. Aim for a variation of both to add interest and depth.

Add Warm Clouds

Mix a little yellow ochre with white to create a warm cloud color. Apply it with a soft edge as it moves off the canvas, and sharpen the edge slightly at the center of interest.

Highlight with Sunlit Spots

Add more white and a tiny touch of bright yellow to create a sunlit spot on the cloud. This should echo the strong light present in other areas of the painting.

PRO TIP

Ensure the sky is lighter and cooler than the distant mountains to create depth.

29 Tree Trunks and Branches



Mix a Warm Dark Color

Combine Phthalo Blue, Alizarin Crimson, and Yellow Ochre to create a warm dark color for the tree trunks. Adjust the warmth by adding more of the warm colors. Thin the mixture slightly to avoid clumpiness and unwanted light reflection.

Paint Tree Trunks and Branches

Apply the paint with bold, free brushwork to maintain an expressionistic style. Avoid being too precise to prevent a stilted look. Remember that trunks get thinner as they extend from the base and aim for an asymmetric balance.

Add Dark Accents

Use the opportunity to place a few dark accents around the painting. This adds depth and interest to the composition.

Soften Branch Edges

To integrate branches into the tree, soften their edges with a brush using the foliage color or a dry brush. This technique helps branches dissolve into the tree, avoiding a 'poking out' appearance.

PRO TIP

Soften branch edges with a dry brush to help them blend into the tree.

30 Enhancing Grass and Light



Enhance Grass Color

Add a touch of color to the grasses to provide balance. Use lighter shades to reflect the strong light coming across the scene.

Create Light Continuity

Ensure the added colors in the grass continue the sense of light striking the other bank. This will help fill in gaps and enhance the overall light effect.

PRO TIP

Use lighter shades in the grass to reflect and enhance the sense of strong light in the scene.

31 Final Details and Reflections



Add Shadows to Rocks

Paint some rock shapes in the shadow areas using a darker color. Focus on the spaces between the rocks to enhance depth.

Reflect Dark Rocks

Use the dark color from the rocks and reflect it in the water below. This will create a realistic reflection effect.

Reflect Light Rocks

Take the light rock color and reflect it in the water. This adds another layer of detail and enhances the realism.

Lighten Rock Faces

Lighten the rock faces that are facing the blue sky by adding a bit of blue to the lighter color. Apply this to the appropriate areas for a cohesive look.

Add Final Details

Add a few small details to complete the painting, ensuring all elements are cohesive and balanced.

PRO TIP

Reflect both dark and light rock colors in the water to enhance realism.

32 Adding Final Touches



Add Tree Highlights

Consider where the light is coming from and add small highlights to the trees. Focus on the left side of clumps of vegetation to show where the light hits. This adds sparkle and life to the painting without overdoing it.

Avoid Overdoing Highlights

Be careful not to add highlights everywhere, as this can make the painting look too busy. Aim for a balanced look by placing highlights strategically.

Enhance with Strong Highlights

As elements get closer to being in line with the sun, add stronger highlights. These areas reflect the sun more directly, adding a vibrant sparkle to the scene.

Add Birds for Interest

Include a few small birds in the sky to add interest and a sense of life to the painting. This simple touch can enhance the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Add highlights strategically to avoid making the painting look too busy.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by identifying the element that captivates you the most in your scene. This focal point will guide your composition and ensure your painting has a clear direction. Use cropping and composition techniques to emphasize this center of interest, removing unnecessary elements and adjusting shapes to guide the viewer's eye naturally through your artwork.

As you progress, pay attention to light and shadow adjustments to add dynamism and depth to your scene. Use color temperature differences to create distance and guide the viewer's eye, and remember that the choice of canvas and materials can significantly affect the final outcome. Mixing your paints with the right consistency and using pre-mixed colors can save time and maintain harmony throughout your painting.

Finally, embrace the plein air painting mindset by setting a timer to capture spontaneity and urgency in your work. Use a combination of soft and crisp edges to add variety, and remember to adjust your values for indoor viewing. By focusing on these techniques, you can create a painting that is both dynamic and harmonious, capturing the essence of the mountain river scene.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use contrast effectively to highlight your focal point.
- Crop the scene to highlight your center of interest.
- Use color temperature differences to create depth.
- Loosen the white paint with walnut oil for better flow.
- Use nitrile gloves to protect your skin from harmful pigments.
- Vary the angles and distances between elements for dynamic composition.
- Use cooler and lighter colors to create the illusion of distance.
- Set a timer to capture the plein air effect in the studio.



The Rees River, New Zealand

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.

“Mountain River by Peter Eckel” by **Peter Eckel**



Mountain River by Peter Eckel

Great work Peter. That's a solid copy. Everything's looking good. I'd just tweak the rocks on the left - make one or two of them bigger and make sure the spaces between them are random. Joining darks together works well to avoid pattern making.

“Rees Valley, by Jay Trotter, oil on board, 12x24”, by **Jay Trotter**



Rees Valley, by Jay Trotter, oil on board, 12x24",

Hi Jay, good painting! Bold brushwork with an interesting variety of texture. Colour's are quite punchy. I'd like to see the black removed from the shadows in the light green tree as it's killing the feeling of light penetrating the leaves. A dark grey green will give you that effect.

Interesting how you the darkened hill behind makes the colours pop more in the trees. That's comes at the expense of a little less depth, in terms of how far that hill appears from the viewer, but everything's a trade off. One of my favorite New Zealand artists who painted this area, Douglas Badcock, was a proponent of using strong darks in the background like that to deliver very dramatic, punchy paintings.

If you add a few more little bumps to the edges of your mountains they'll look more realistic. Unless you're happy with that level of stylisation of course.

Good job.

“Placid Stream, Mighty Mountains by Ian States” by Ian States



Placid Stream, Mighty Mountains by Ian States

Giddy Ian, thanks for adding your painting. Really good work here. The drawing is accurate, colours are vibrant, brushwork has interest and variety. You did a great job of layering the receding mountains.

Just two colour suggestions for you. The tan sunlit slope on the distant mountains would recede better if it had a little more grey blue in it. Presently it's competing with the trees.

Similarly the orange in the water on the left could be greyed down a little. Other than that, perfect!

“Mountain River in Oils by Geoffrey Geeson” by Geoffrey Geeson



Mountain River in Oils by Geoffrey Geeson

Great subtle work in here Geoffrey. Really nice. The only small thing I'd like to change is the foreground tree to be a little stronger where it overlaps the second tree so that there's a clearer separation of forms there. Its light shape got a little lost.