



Southern Light

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/89-Southern-Light>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I invite you to join me in painting a serene harbour scene, where boats gently sway under the southern light. While boats are the focal point, the essence of this lesson is to perceive your painting as a symphony of visual elements. Much like a piece of music, a painting harmonizes shapes, colors, lines, and textures to evoke a particular feeling. We'll delve into the use of warm and cool color variations and expressive brushwork to bring this scene to life. Drawing inspiration from the works of Charles Movelli, you'll learn how a broader, more lyrical style can enhance your plein air painting. I encourage you to experiment with composition, perhaps by flipping elements like a boat to alter the flow and perspective of your piece. Adding more green throughout your painting will create depth and cohesion, while red accents will inject energy and contrast. This scene offers a rewarding opportunity to explore these techniques and make the painting truly your own.



"Southern Light - Studio" 13x13" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



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
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium or Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas (Giving it a light sanding first helps the paint stick better).
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Inspiration and Style



Explore Inspiration

Study the works of Charles Movelli to understand how a broader, more lyrical style can enhance your plein air painting. Use his approach as a source of inspiration for your own work.

Analyze Composition

Consider flipping elements in your painting to see how the composition reads differently. For example, flipping a boat can change the flow from left to right, offering a new perspective.

Enhance with Color

Incorporate more green into your painting to add depth and interest. Thread this color through the composition, especially in areas like water, to create a cohesive look.

Add Vibrant Accents

Introduce red accents to your painting to create a vibrant contrast against the green. This will add energy and visual interest to your work.

PRO TIP

Use contrasting colors like red and green to create vibrancy and movement in your painting.

2 Redesigning the Image



Print and Analyze Your Photo

Print out the photo you plan to paint. Place it in front of you and begin analyzing the composition, focusing on what elements are most interesting to you.

Consider Cropping Options

Look for ways to crop and redesign the image to fit a square format. Focus on the elements you find most compelling, such as the boat and its details.

Eliminate Unnecessary Elements

Identify areas of the image that seem like wasted space or are not of interest. Consider removing or minimizing these elements to enhance the composition.

Experiment with Composition

Try moving elements around within the square format to see if it improves the composition. Consider how the placement of dark and light areas affects the overall design.

PRO TIP

Focus on the most compelling elements of your photo and eliminate unnecessary details to enhance the composition.

3 Transferring the Drawing



Prepare the Boat Image

Print the boat image at the size you want for your painting. Flip the image over and cover the back with pencil to create a transfer layer.

Position and Secure the Image

Place the image on your canvas where you want it. Mark the corners to ensure it stays in place if it slips.

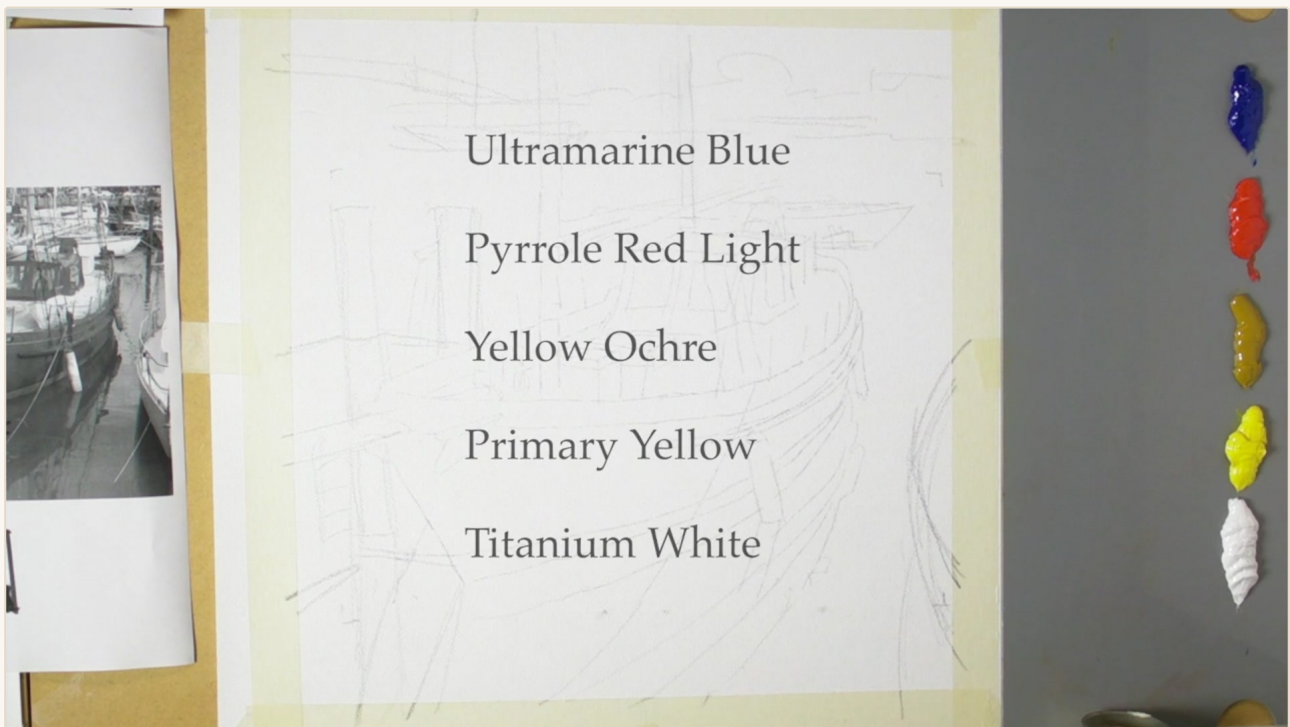
Trace the Major Lines

Use a pen to trace around the major lines of the boat, pressing firmly to transfer the pencil onto the canvas.

PRO TIP

Cover the back of your printed image with pencil to create an easy transfer layer.

4 Mixing Neutral Greys



Prepare Your Palette

Ensure your palette includes blue, red, and yellow ochre. These will be your base colors for mixing neutral greys.

Mix Dark Neutral Grey

Combine blue, red, and yellow ochre to create your darkest dark grey. This will serve as the foundation for your other grey tones.

Create Mid Value Grey

Take a portion of your dark grey mixture and add white to it. This will lighten the tone to a mid value grey.

Mix Light Value Grey

Take a portion of your mid value grey and add more white to achieve a light value grey. This will complete your range of neutral greys.

PRO TIP

Use these neutral greys to tone down other colors in your painting where needed.

5 Blocking in Dark Shapes



Prepare the Canvas

Spray the canvas lightly with water and then gently dry it with paper towels. This helps the paint adhere more smoothly. If using traditional oils, apply odorless turps instead.

Apply the Darkest Dark

Dip your largest brush in walnut oil and load it with the darkest dark paint you've mixed. Boldly apply this color to the base of the hull, ensuring strong coverage.

Identify and Block Other Dark Areas

While you have the darkest dark on your brush, scan the entire image to identify other areas needing this shade. Block in these areas with confidence.

Blend to Mid Values

Mix a bit of medium grey with the dark grey to create a slightly lighter tone. Apply this mix as the hull curves up and around to the back, filling in the space.

Create Interesting Brush Marks

Consider how to connect the dark and mid-value shapes with dynamic brush marks. Challenge yourself to leave the brush strokes visible, embracing the texture they add.

PRO TIP

Leave visible brush marks to add texture and interest to your painting.

6 Using Broken Color



Mix the Color

Add blue and red to a mid-gray base, incorporating a touch of dark gray. Aim to match the value of the color already present on the side of the boat.

Check the Value

Place a small blob of your mixed color onto the existing color. Squint at it to reduce the color intensity and see if the blob stands out. If it does, adjust the mix to match the value more closely.

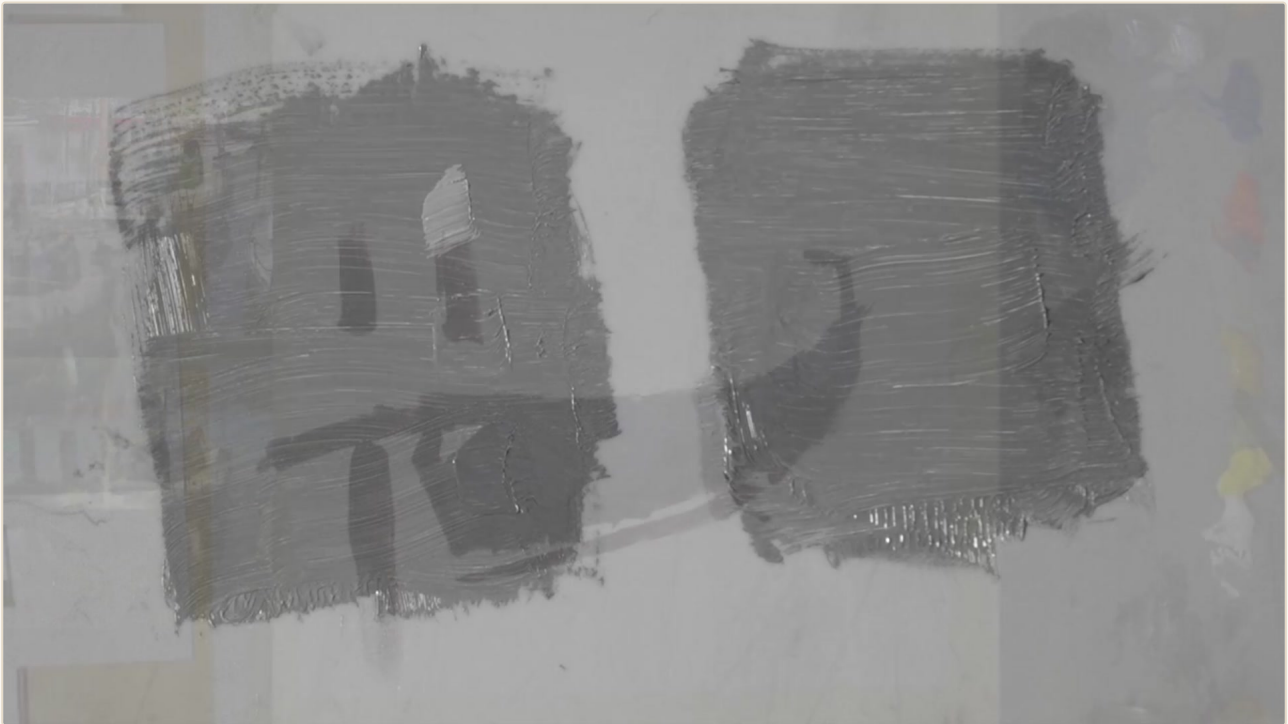
Adjust and Test Again

If the color is too light or too dark, add more blue and red as needed. Test again by squinting to ensure the blob blends in and matches the value.

PRO TIP

Squinting helps you see if the new color matches the value of the existing color.

7 Adding Color Variations



Add Yellow Ochre to Dark Gray

Mix yellow ochre with your dark gray to create a shadowy area in the water. Use walnut oil to keep the paint thin and translucent, ensuring you cover the canvas effectively.

Introduce Color Variation

Avoid painting large areas with a single color. Observe the photo for hints of lighter and cooler tones at the bottom, and add yellow to make the area slightly lighter and greener.

Paint the Red Waterline

Add the red waterline paint on the boat as a color feature against the green. Tone it down with green, but enhance it slightly for a lively touch. Ensure the reflection is included, making it a bit darker for realism.

Enhance with Yellow Ochre

Add a lot of yellow ochre to the dark green on your palette to create an interesting color note along the specified area.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to keep your paint thin and translucent while covering the canvas.

8 Painting Dark and Mid Values



Darken the Boat's Reflection

Darken the reflection on the side of the boat to emphasize its curving form. This helps create depth and dimension in the water.

Enhance the Poles with Color

Add more color to the poles while maintaining the same value. This adds interest without disrupting the overall tonal balance.

Paint Dark Green Shadow Areas

Mix dark gray with a little blue and bright yellow to paint the shadow areas of the canopy. Apply this color to all relevant areas, treating it like a jigsaw puzzle to maintain consistency.

Transition to Mid Values

Add more blue, yellow, and a touch of white to the green mix to create mid values. Use this for areas catching more light and reflecting the sky.

Add Color Accents and Shadows

Use a dark brownish grey for the wooden edging and a lighter purplish tinge for the top edges reflecting the sky. This adds subtle color variation and enhances realism.

Define the Jetty and Deck

Paint the top of the jetty dark to make the light deck of the boat stand out. Use mid and light grays on the deck, adding yellow and blue to create an interesting pattern of shapes.

PRO TIP

Treat painting like a jigsaw puzzle by using consistent colors across similar areas to maintain harmony.

9 Detailing the Deck



Create Interesting Patterns on the Deck

Use mid and light grays, adding yellow and blue to create an interesting pattern of shapes. Refer to the photo as a guide to capture the simple blocky shapes on the deck.

Paint the Light on the Deck

Mix two yellows with white and apply it thickly without any medium. Ensure the paint is bright to capture the light on the deck.

Add Details to Structures

Describe the box-like structures, mast base, and dinghy with three or four simple brush strokes. Ensure the old boat fender is not as bright as the mast base to maintain focus.

Define Shadows and Light

Lay in the shadow sides of the masts and booms first. Then apply the light on top, using thick paint to prevent muddiness.

Paint a Red Figure

Add a simple red figure at the end of the boat using a few big shapes. Plan to redefine it later when painting surrounding areas.

PRO TIP

Paint shapes slightly larger than needed to allow for edge refinement with adjacent colors.

10 Painting Water and Background



Paint Lighter Water

Start with a mid-grey mixed with more blue and yellow to create a greenish tone. Focus on the relationship between these colors and the dark reflection. Gradually lighten and add blue as the water recedes, using horizontal bands that thin out to suggest ripples.

Mix Background Colors

Create a bluish gray for the background, ensuring it's lighter than the photo to enhance depth. Aim for a jumble of greys and greens to complement the foreground's green theme. Build simple shapes with dark and light sides to suggest trees or buildings.

Maintain Background Subtlety

Keep background values similar, in a mid to dark grey range, to prevent distraction from the main subject. Use soft edges to ensure the background supports the main story of the boat. Add a subdued red boat as a counterpoint, ensuring it doesn't outshine the red shirt on the figure.

PRO TIP

Use horizontal bands of color that thin out to create an impression of ripples in the water.

11 Adjusting Background Elements



Remove Unwanted Elements

If a background element is confusing or distracting, like the white boat behind the main boat, remove it. Scrape off the unwanted element with a palette knife and paint over it with thicker paint. This is easier with oils or acrylics, but challenging with watercolors.

Paint Over Light Areas

When painting over a light area with another light color, you don't need to wipe the background. Ensure the base paint is not too thick, or scrape and wipe it before applying new paint.

Prepare Your Palette

Add alizarin crimson to your palette to prepare for the next painting steps. This color will be useful for adjusting and enhancing background elements.

PRO TIP

When painting over a light area with another light color, there's no need to wipe the background clean.

12 Adding Violet and Green Accents



Add Violet Grays

Mix Alizarin Crimson to create beautiful violet grays. Ensure the violet gray is the same value as the area you are applying it to for a shimmering effect. Apply the darker violet gray to the darker water and the side of the boat.

Lighten for Shadows

Use a lighter version of the violet gray to introduce into the light shadows on the deck. This helps to thread the color throughout the painting, enhancing harmony.

Create Vibrant Green

Add Phthalo Blue to your palette and mix it with a touch of yellow and a fair bit of white. This mixture will create a more vibrant green to complement the violets.

PRO TIP

Ensure the violet gray is the same value as the area you are applying it to for a shimmering effect.

13 Finishing Touches



Soften the Edges

Use soft edges in the background to ensure it recedes and doesn't compete with the focal point. This helps create depth and keeps the viewer's attention on the main subject.

PRO TIP

Use soft edges in the background to make it recede and enhance depth.

14 Final Details and Lines



Add Fine Lines

Use a small brush to add fine lines that will bring cohesion and detail to your painting. Ensure these lines are lively and not too precise to avoid a robotic appearance. Aim for a lyrical and calligraphic quality to infuse life into the lines.

Maintain Line Variation

Use a mahl stick to guide your lines, but allow for natural variation to give them character. Avoid making them perfectly straight like an architect's drawing; instead, let them have a dynamic flow.

Manage Paint Consistency

When applying dark strokes over thick, light paint, clean and refill your brush frequently. This ensures the lines remain crisp and do not pick up unwanted colors from the underlying paint.

PRO TIP

Use a mahl stick to guide your lines, but allow for natural variation to give them character.

15 Final Touches and Signing



Add the Seagull

Use three simple strokes to paint the seagull. Start with your darkest dark for the body, then add a light grey for the wings. Finish with a white or very close to white for highlights.

Include the Red Life Saving Ring

Don't forget to add the red life saving ring to your painting. This small detail can add interest and a pop of color.

Sign Your Painting

Complete your artwork by signing it. This personal touch marks the painting as your own creation.

PRO TIP

Use three distinct tones to create a simple yet effective seagull.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by drawing inspiration from the broader, lyrical style of Charles Movelli. Begin by reimagining your composition, focusing on the most compelling elements and eliminating distractions. Transfer your drawing onto the canvas with precision, setting the stage for a vibrant interplay of colors.

As you progress, mix a range of neutral greys to serve as the foundation for your painting, and boldly block in dark shapes to establish depth. Embrace the use of broken color and color variations to add vibrancy and movement, ensuring your brushstrokes remain visible to enhance texture.

In the final stages, refine your painting with delicate details and lines, using soft edges to create depth in the background. Add finishing touches like a seagull or a life-saving ring to bring your artwork to life. Sign your painting with pride, marking the completion of your creative journey.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use contrasting colors like red and green to create vibrancy.
- Focus on compelling elements and eliminate unnecessary details.
- Cover the back of your printed image with pencil for easy transfer.
- Mix neutral greys to tone down other colors where needed.
- Leave visible brush marks to add texture and interest.
- Use walnut oil to keep paint thin and translucent.
- Treat painting like a jigsaw puzzle for color consistency.
- Use soft edges in the background to enhance depth.



"Southern Light - Studio" 13x13" 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.

“Morning Light” by **Steinunn Einarsdottir**



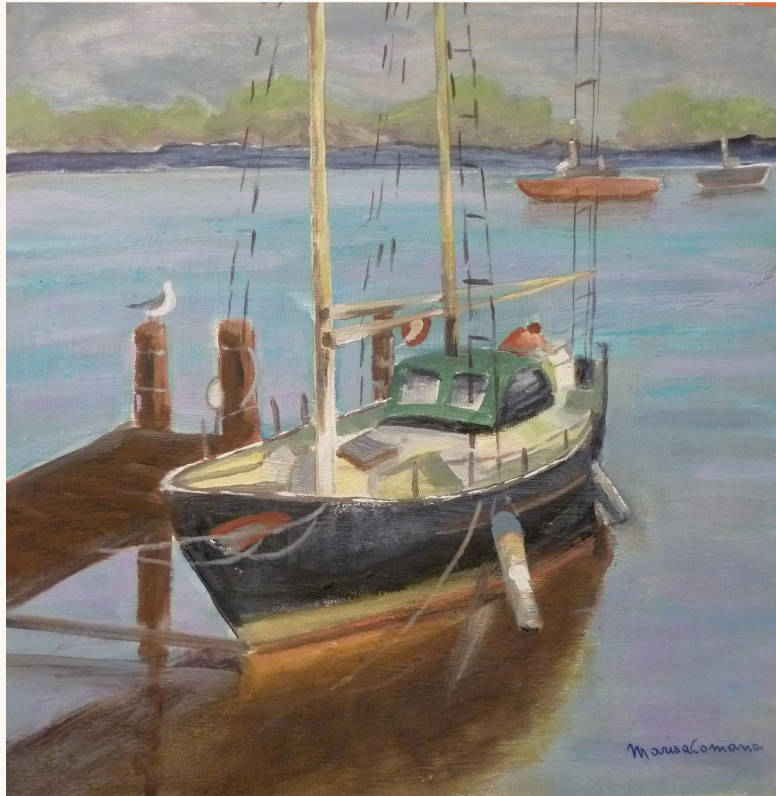
"Morning Light" Oil on Canvas 20x20cm by Steinunn Einarsdottir

Nice work Steinunn, great to see you combining the ideas from a previous workshop into this one as well with the very simplified light filled background. It certainly gives the scene a different mood altogether. You mentioned having some trouble with the canvas soaking up the paint. Just giving the blank canvas a coat of gesso will help a lot with that, or even a coat of white acrylic. Getting a smoother canvas will also help as it takes less paint to fill the weave. I use Fredrix Ultrasmooth at the moment.

Your reduced palette has worked really well with this painting and that's adding to the more subdued mood. Great to see that. It's reminiscent of some of Charles Movalli's work which has been some of my inspiration for this particular workshop. The subtle bits of broken colour you've introduced are working well, although I challenge you to push that further in the next workshop. See how much visual vibration you can add into the painting before the whole thing shakes apart.

Your big brushwork is great but I would highly recommend switching to a finer brush for the detail work of ropes and poles etc. A smoother canvas will allow finer brushwork to show more clearly.

"Online Workshop #30" by Marisa Comana Pessina



"Online Workshop #30" Acrylic on Board 30x30cm by Marisa Comana Pessina

Good work Marisa, you've got the basics of this working well. The drawing is good, although the dock is at an odd angle and the reflection of the first bumper needs to start where the bumper touches the water. You've started to play with the broken colour idea in the water but it's absent elsewhere. Being acrylics, you can paint right over the top of this without delay so I encourage to do just that - have another think about adding broken colour into all the other areas of the painting and just as you've done so well in the water, keep the value the same as the colour you're working into. Don't be afraid to paint thick and leave those brush strokes showing!

"Supper Time" by Aurelia Sieberhagen



"Supper Time" Oil by Aurelia Sieberhagen

Great painting Aurelia and a good example of the clever use of broken colour - thank you. You've managed to keep delicate control of your values so that from a distance each colour block has the appearance of a shimmering area whereas up close we can see the individual colours that add together to create this beautiful effect. Great to see you simplifying the overall value scheme too and also turning the forms of the animals by changing colour temperature - beautiful! I don't have anything helpful to add sorry, just wanted to point out the good work to others and give you a pat on the back.

“Harbor Scene” by Jon Main



"Harbor Scene" Oil on Canvas 60x70cm by Jon Main

Good work Jon. The first thing that strikes me is the design - quite daring to include the snippet of the boat in the front left corner there, reminding me of Sorolla's impromptu compositions which give more the impression of a view of something from everyday life, not something careful posed. Great to see you using the broken colour idea in the sky especially and threading colours throughout the painting. I think the only thing letting this painting down at the moment is the drawing. The red sail coming in from the left bends as it goes up for instance, and the waterline of the black boat on the right is below that of the white boat in front of it and there's a sail tucked in between those two boats which doesn't make sense. Some of the masts and their reflections are at odd angles too. Some of the reflections are brighter than their sources too which spoils the illusion of reflection. Fix those sorts of drawing issues and you're onto a real winner here. Good stuff.