



Broken Colour Basics

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/88-Broken-Colour-Basics>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I delve into the fascinating world of broken color, a technique that breathes life and vibrancy into your paintings. We'll explore what broken color truly means and how to effectively incorporate it into your artwork. To illustrate this, we'll start with a seemingly simple block study from life. While it might appear straightforward at first glance, this exercise presents a rewarding challenge that will enhance your understanding and skills. Initially, I'll guide you through painting the block using a toneless method, capturing it just as it appears. Then, we'll introduce broken color to transform the painting, adding depth and interest. This foundational lesson is crucial, as it contains the keys to mastering more complex applications of broken color in future projects. Embrace the challenge, and enjoy the process of discovering how this technique can elevate your art to new levels of expression and dynamism.



"Block study 2 - broken colour" 8x8" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson

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 Drawing the cube



Set the Cube Boundaries

Decide where you want to place the boundaries of your cube on the canvas. Aim for a balanced size that fits well within your composition.

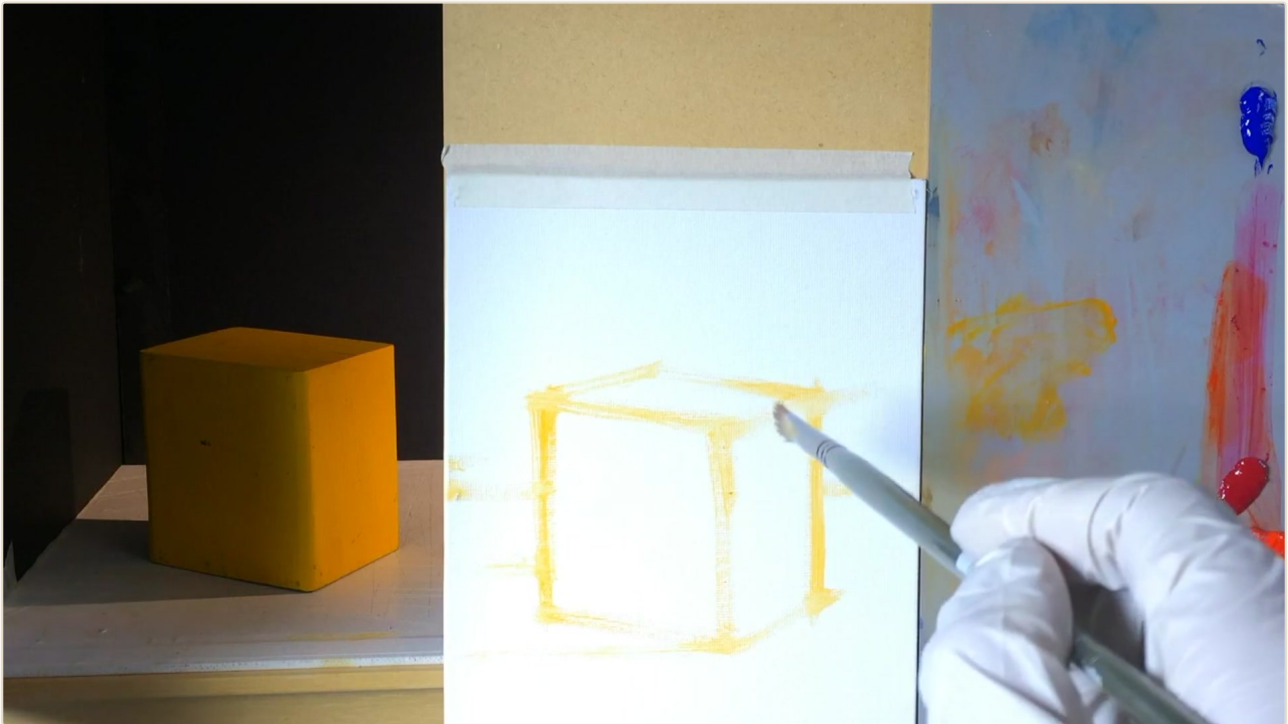
Consider Perspective

Remember that the perspective from your eye may differ slightly from what the camera captures. Adjust your drawing accordingly to ensure the cube appears correct from your viewpoint.

PRO TIP

For accurate cube shapes, refer to perspective drawing techniques.

2 Painting the vibrant side



Start with Vibrant Colors

Begin by focusing on the most vibrant area of your painting. Use a warm light to highlight this section, making the yellow face appear warmer.

Mix Yellow and Orange

Combine yellow and orange to achieve the desired warmth. Adjust the mix to be slightly darker if necessary, ensuring the color reflects the light source accurately.

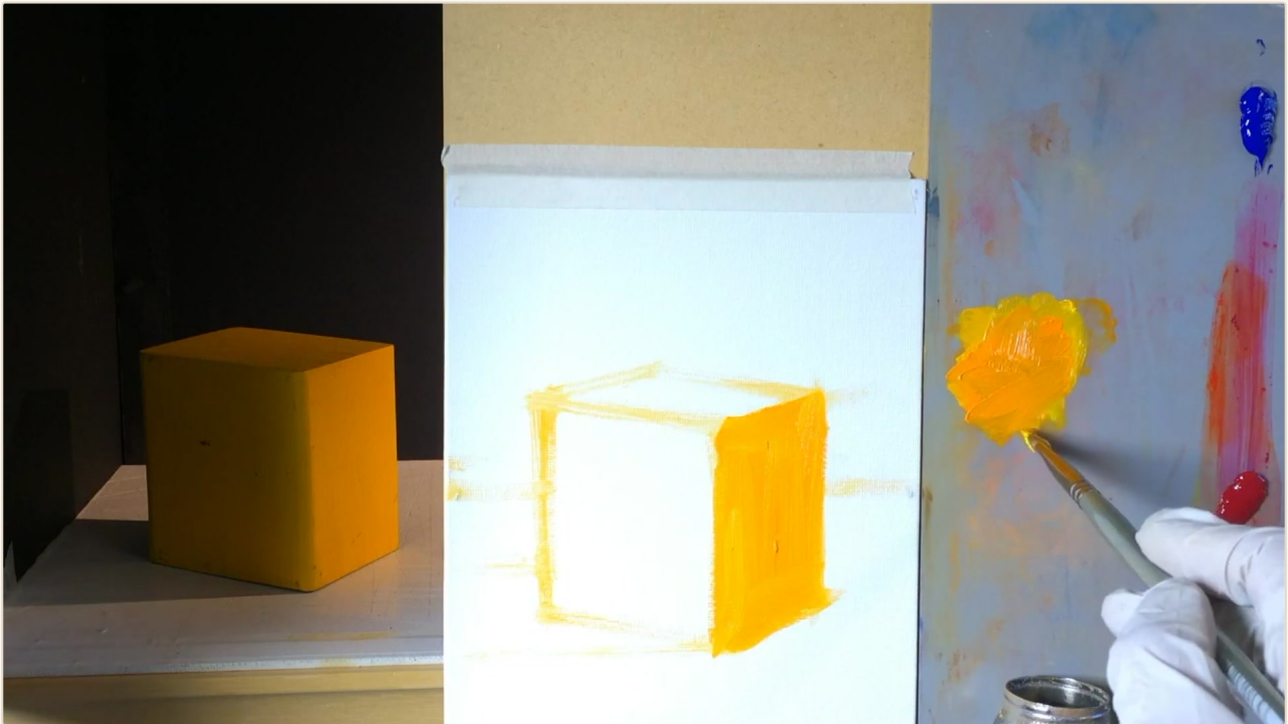
Adjust the Color Balance

If the color appears too light, increase the amount of orange in your mix. This will help achieve a balance where the yellow paint appears more orange under the lighting conditions.

PRO TIP

Use a warm light source to enhance the vibrancy of yellow and orange tones in your painting.

3 Mixing the shadow color



Mix the Shadow Color

Start with an orange base for the shadow color. Add a touch of red to darken the orange slightly. Incorporate a bit of blue to grey down the orange, as blue is the complement of orange on the color wheel. Keep the mixture slightly more saturated initially, allowing for adjustments later to lower the chroma if needed.

PRO TIP

It's easier to lower the saturation of a color than to raise it, so begin with a slightly more saturated mix.

4 Adjusting color relationships



Adjust Blue and Yellow

Add more blue to your mix to see how it affects the color. Aim for a slightly darker tone, but not too much. Consider adding a touch of yellow if needed to balance the hue.

Understand Light and Shadow

Recognize that a warm light source creates a cool shadow, and vice versa. Adjust your colors accordingly to reflect this relationship in your painting.

Refine Block Edges

Don't worry if the drawing of the block isn't perfect. Use the background colors to cut into the edges and reshape the block, refining its form.

Clean Your Brush

Clean your brush thoroughly to prevent muddy colors. This is crucial for maintaining clarity and vibrancy in your painting.

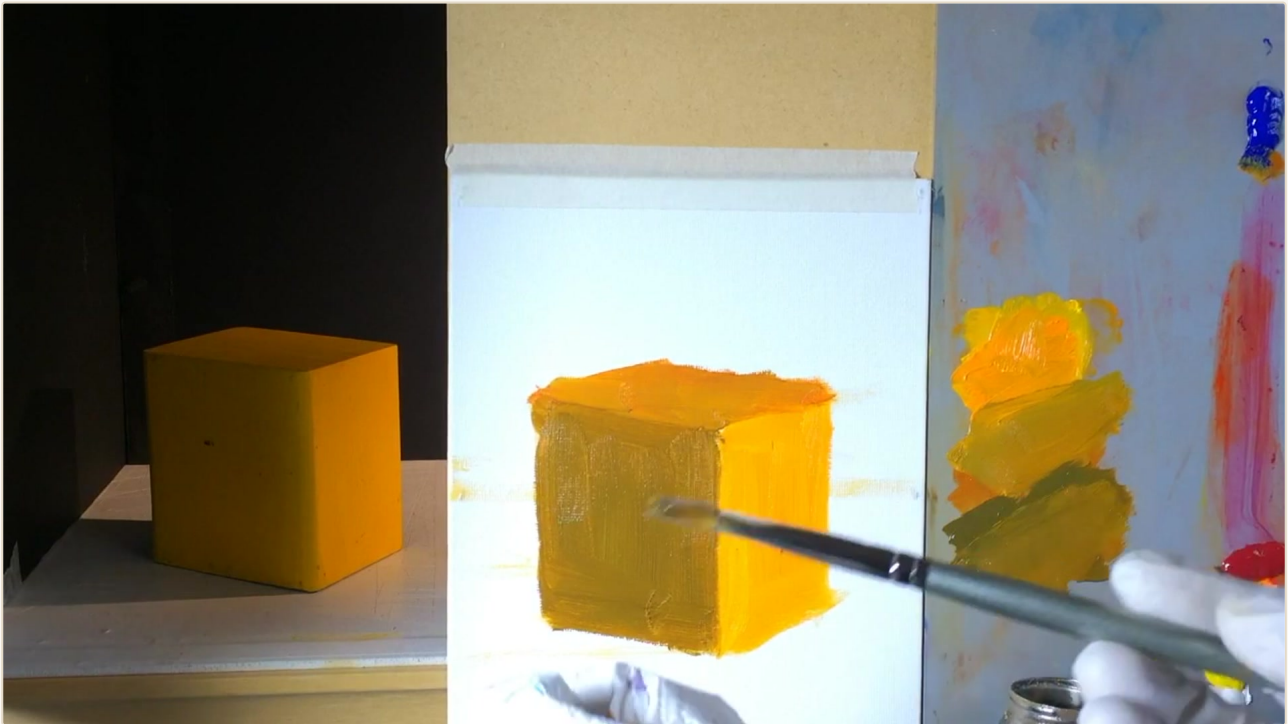
Focus on Color Relationships

Instead of fixating on matching a single color, concentrate on the relationships between the colors. Adjust the colors until the relationships feel harmonious, such as reducing orange if it feels too dominant.

PRO TIP

Clean your brush thoroughly to prevent muddy colors and maintain vibrancy.

5 Seeing shapes and colors



Simplify the Scene

Close one eye and squint the other, or remove your glasses if you wear them, to blur your vision. This helps you lose the detail and see the scene as simple shapes of color.

Observe Shapes and Colors

Spend about 30 seconds looking at the block with one eye closed. Notice how the shapes become flat and lose their three-dimensionality, appearing as interconnecting shapes like a jigsaw puzzle.

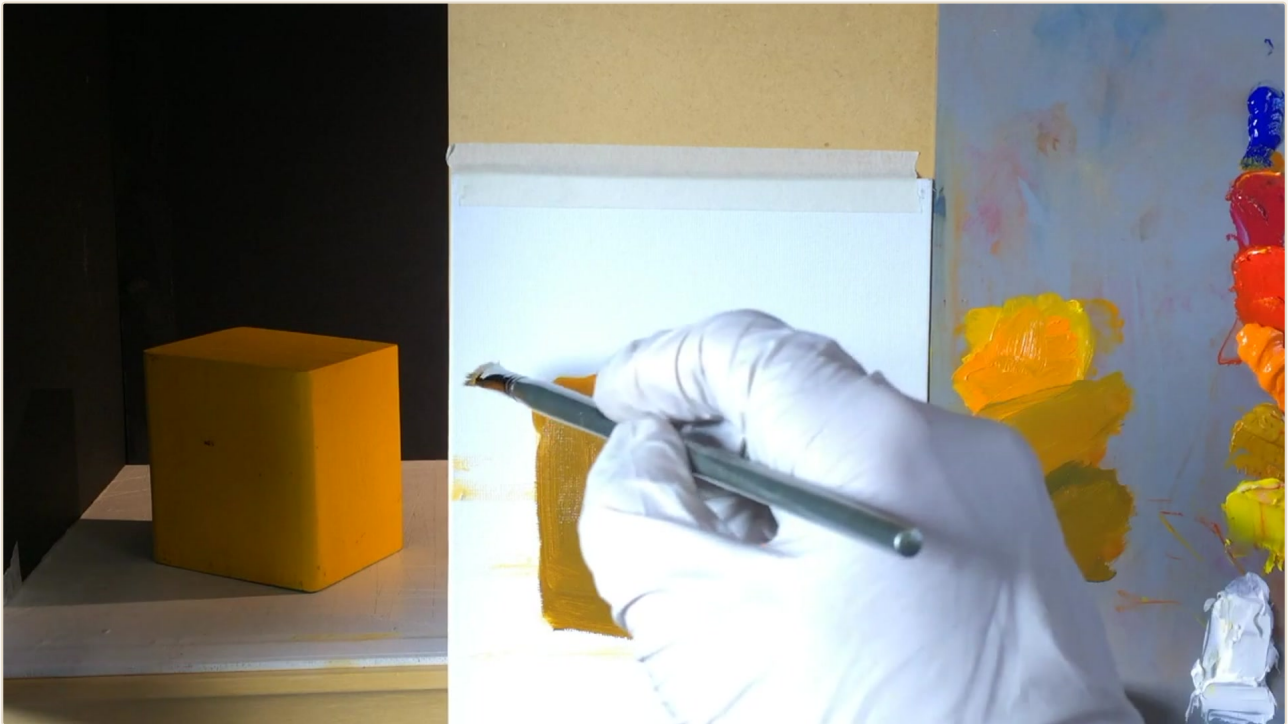
Understand Color Relationships

By viewing the scene as flat shapes, you can better perceive the true colors and their relationships to each other. This understanding is crucial for effective painting.

PRO TIP

Squinting helps simplify the scene into basic shapes and colors, making it easier to paint accurately.

6 Painting the background



Mix the Dark Background Color

Reach for your darkest color and add some orange to it. Adjust the mix by adding more red and orange than blue to avoid a greenish tint. Lighten the mixture slightly to achieve a gray tone, as pure black is rarely seen in natural settings.

Apply the Dark Background

Paint the dark background around the cube. Notice how this dark color enhances the brightness and vibrancy of the cube's colors. Avoid using a vibrant background color, as it can diminish the cube's vibrancy.

Add Blue to the Shadow

Identify the shadow area that appears to have more blue. Mix in some blue and a little white to your existing color, then apply it to the shadow. This detail adds realism to the painting.

Refine the Shadow with White

Add more white to your shadow mix to lighten it slightly. Compare the lightness of this shadow to other areas, ensuring you maintain the correct relationships between darks, mids, and lights.

Paint the Occlusion Shadow

Paint up to the occlusion shadow, where minimal light reaches. Extend your paint slightly beyond the desired finish line to ensure complete coverage.

PRO TIP

Always compare darks to darks, mids to mids, and lights to lights to maintain accurate color relationships.

7 Adjusting light and shadow



Compare Lightest Lights

Compare the lightest light already in your painting to the area you are working on. Identify if the area is a warm gray due to light falling on it.

Mix a Warm Gray

Add yellow ochre to your mix, as ochre is an orange that helps achieve a gray tone. Test the color by applying a small amount to see how it looks.

Adjust Color Temperature

Notice the color changes from cooler and darker to warmer and lighter. Mix blue and red for a purple, then add yellow to achieve a gray. Adjust by adding more of one color to shift the hue.

Fine-Tune the Value

Squint to compare the value of your mix to the painting. If it appears too dark or too light, adjust by adding more warmth or lightness as needed.

Create Soft and Sharp Edges

Use a soft edge in the background to push forward the sharp edges of the subject. This contrast enhances depth.

Add Occlusion Shadow

Add a dark gray-green occlusion shadow to areas where light is not reaching. Avoid using pure black, as reflected light often adds a glow.

PRO TIP

Squint at your painting to better judge the value relationships between colors.

8 Applying broken color to the cube



Mix a Redder Hue

Start with the original orange-yellow color on your palette. Add some red to this mixture to create a redder hue. Note that adding red will darken the color.

Adjust with White

To lighten the darkened mixture, add white. Be aware that adding white will also cool the color, giving it a pastel orange appearance.

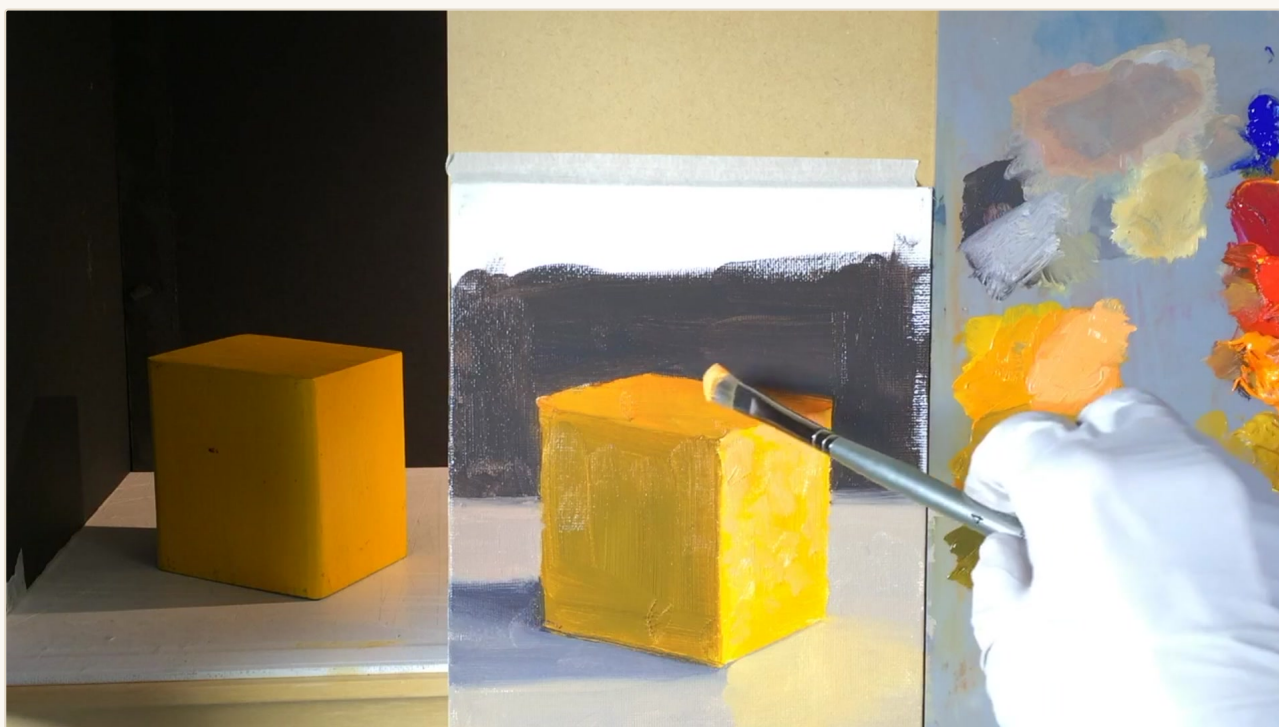
Apply Broken Color Technique

Use a brush to drag the new color across the surface of the cube, avoiding mixing with the layer underneath. Refill your brush frequently and apply small dabs of color, with occasional larger strokes, to allow the original orange to show through gaps.

PRO TIP

Add white to lighten a color, but remember it will also cool the hue, shifting it towards blue.

9 Adjusting broken color on different sides



Adjust the Color Value

To adjust the color on the side, start by darkening it. Use a color from the top and add some red to it, as red is a darker value than green.

Lighten the Mixture

If the mixture becomes too dark, add some white to lighten it. Be cautious not to over-lighten; if it becomes too light, add red back into it.

Test the Color Value

Test the adjusted color by placing a small dot on a separate area. Squint at it to check if it disappears, indicating the value matches your desired tone.

Apply the Color

Apply the color by dragging it over the surface without blending into the layer underneath. Use this chance to refine the edges and improve the drawing.

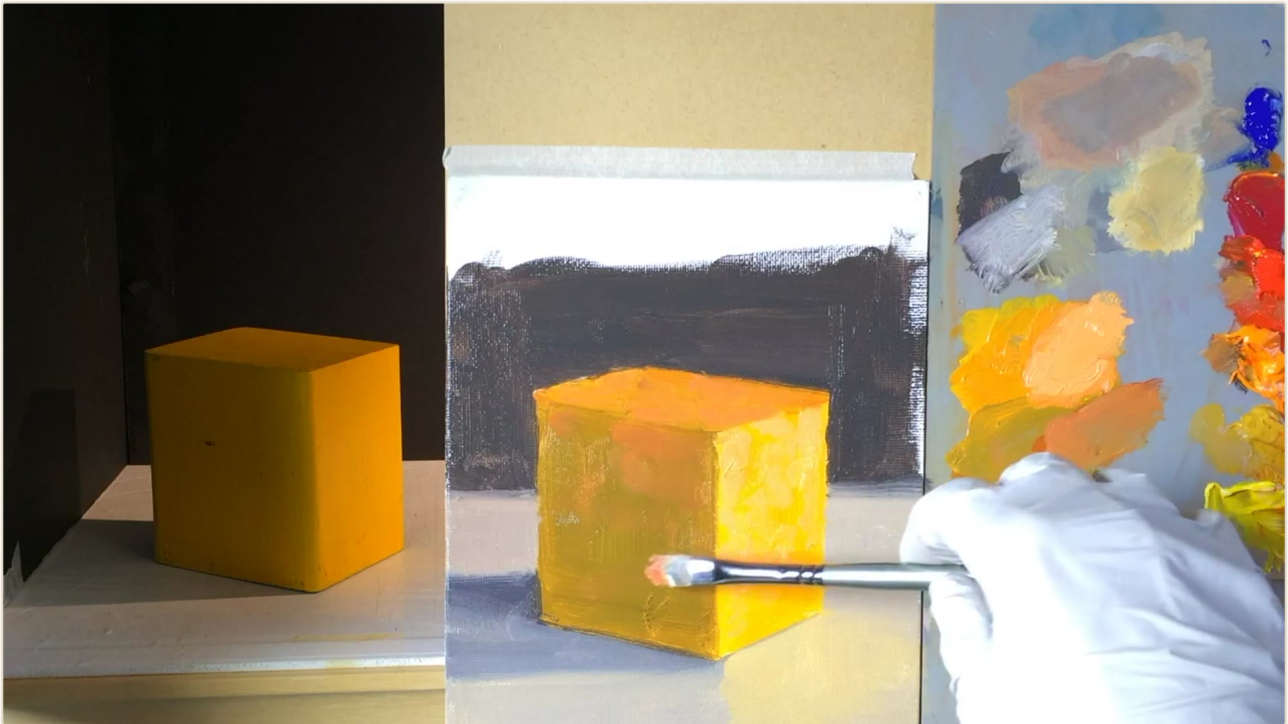
Consider Color Complement

When adding red to a green area, remember red is the complement of green. This can neutralize the color, potentially making it appear more grey or brown.

PRO TIP

Test your color by placing a small dot on a separate area and squinting to see if it disappears, ensuring the value is correct.

10 Enhancing the background with broken color



Enhance with Red

Add some red to the background using a palette knife for interesting textural marks. Apply the red thinly to allow the canvas weave to show through, creating a more dynamic effect.

Introduce Orange

Start with orange to add vibrancy. Ensure the orange is the same value as the surrounding colors to maintain harmony.

Add Green Accents

Mix a green that matches the value of the surrounding area. Use this green to create a rounded half tone along the edges, enhancing depth.

Incorporate Blue

Move into a greeny-blue for areas that are already green. Use the darker tone to your advantage in shadowed areas, adding complexity.

Mix Grey-Green

For a grey background, mix a grey-green by adding red to your green. This will enrich the background with subtle color variations.

Light Green Highlights

Add light green to the base for highlights. Adjust the lightness to ensure it complements the surrounding colors.

PRO TIP

Constantly refresh your brush to avoid muddled colors and maintain vibrant, clean strokes.

11 Next steps and practice suggestions



Experiment with Broken Colour

Use the broken colour technique in your next painting. Play around with the idea and explore different ways to apply it.

Increase Vibrancy

Try increasing the vibrancy or saturation of the broken colour in your study. This will add more interest and depth to your work.

Expand Your Study

After completing a simple one-block study, add more blocks to make it more interesting and challenging. This will help you practice and refine your technique.

Incorporate Rounded Objects

Move on to painting rounded objects like a pear or a billiard ball. This will further develop your skills and understanding of broken colour.

PRO TIP

Increase the vibrancy of your broken colour to add more interest to your painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by carefully drawing the cube, ensuring it fits harmoniously within your composition. Pay attention to perspective adjustments to capture the cube accurately from your viewpoint. As you move to painting, start with the most vibrant side, using warm light to enhance the yellow and orange tones. Adjust your mixes to reflect the light source, and remember that color relationships are more important than matching a single hue.

As you progress, focus on mixing shadow colors and adjusting color relationships. Use complementary colors to achieve the desired saturation and balance. Clean your brush regularly to maintain clarity and vibrancy in your work. Simplify the scene by squinting to see shapes and colors as flat, interlocking pieces, which will help you understand their relationships better.

Finally, apply the broken color technique to add texture and depth to your painting. Experiment with different hues and values to enhance the vibrancy and interest of your work. Practice with simple shapes before moving on to more complex forms, and always aim to maintain harmony in your color choices. With these techniques, you can create dynamic and engaging paintings that capture the essence of broken color.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use perspective drawing techniques for accurate cube shapes.
- Enhance vibrancy with a warm light source.
- Start with a more saturated color mix; it's easier to lower saturation.
- Clean your brush thoroughly to prevent muddy colors.
- Squint to simplify the scene into basic shapes and colors.
- Compare darks to darks, mids to mids, and lights to lights.
- Add white to lighten a color, but remember it cools the hue.
- Test your color by placing a small dot and squinting to check value.

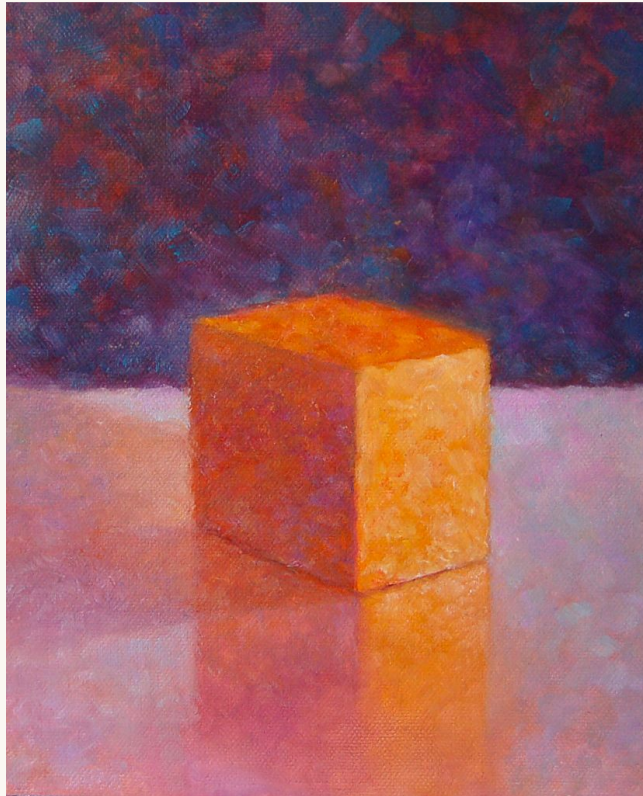


"Block study 2 - broken colour" 8x8" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson

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.

"Broken Color Workshop 31" by Luba Robinson



"Broken Color Workshop 31" by Luba Robinson

Nice work Luba. I can see all sorts of interesting colour in there. Beware of making patterns with your brushwork - having more variation in brushstroke size and direction will add more interest to the painting.

"5x7 Acrylic on matt board" by Hyun (Jane) Kim



"5x7 Acrylic on matt board" Oil on Canvas by Hyun (Jane) Kim

Exciting work Hyun. Tonally this is great and colour is very powerful against the dark background. Kind of a shame it's in acrylic because some of the dry brush and overpainting inherent to acrylics is detracting from what is mostly beautifully fluid brushwork. The small flicks of broken colour are interesting but the pink on the frin and the light blue in the top right are too light and therefor breaking the illusion of form of the cube. Nice work in the spotlight effect and the glowing colour off the top.

"Block Study" by Yngvar Nilsen



"Block Study" 4x6" Acrylic on Canvas by Yngvar Nilsen

Good work Yngvar. Tonally this is very good except the grey table top could have looked more interesting with a subtle tonal gradation from right to left in keeping with the light source. The ochre colour in the background seems to be muddying the colour there at the top - perhaps a different colour choice would have worked better there. Little gaps through to the canvas spoil the illusion in a few places.

"Workshop 31 three color study" by Xiao Li



"Workshop 31 three color study" Oil on Panel 6x6" Each by Xiao Li

Great to see you trying it with different coloured blocks Xiao. Tonally these studies are very well observed- you've got that nailed down. Your broken colour is pretty subtle. I encourage you to try increasing the colour contrast further, really pushing the broken colour idea. When you push it beyond what looks good to you you will have found the limit that you can work within in the future. Good work.