

# Painting project

Part 1 Rachael Grimm introduces this month's painting project from a photograph, a summer landscape with water, sparkling sunlight and a variety of greens

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- How to tackle green in the landscape
- Plan your painting with a tonal sketch and a colour study
- Add more atmosphere to your work

In this month's painting project from a photograph, I selected a photo of a scene (below) that you will eventually go on to paint yourselves. This month, I will discuss the elements of the photo and how to turn it into a good composition, and next month I will offer a step-by-step demonstration, showing how I tackled the painting in watercolour.

## Be prepared

Planning takes a lot of the frustration out of painting, especially when working with watercolour. In my studio I have two scraps of paper taped to the wall with advice I find helpful. One reads 'Look more, think more, paint less' and the other is a quotation from John Singer Sargent: 'Use the fewest strokes possible to express a fact. No slopping around of purposeless paint'. It is important for me to remember this advice, because I find that if I don't plan ahead, I often end up 'slopping around a lot of purposeless paint' and completely overworking a painting. The result can be dull and muddy, when my goal is always for the paint to look as fresh and luminous as possible, to show what watercolour can do.

## You will need

- Smartphone to take photos
- 140lb Cold-pressed watercolour paper
- Sketchbook, pencil & eraser
- Medium flat watercolour brush (for instance, a hake)
- A large palette for mixing
- Winsor & Newton Professional Water Colour: ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cerulean blue, cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium red, alizarin crimson & burnt sienna

Having a plan of attack can help you to be economical with your brushstrokes and successfully communicate to the viewer



▲ Your reference photograph for this demonstration

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▲ This could have been an interesting composition. From this viewpoint, the islands are less pronounced and the sky takes on a larger role.

the thing that made you want to tackle the painting in the first place.

### Find a connection

For this demo, I decided to use a photo of one of my favourite places to walk and sketch. I have painted it on location and sketched it many times. I am struck by its beauty every time I see it. The marshes look different in all seasons and times of day, whether the tide is in or out. This photograph was taken in mid-summer when the leaves were in full leaf and the grass was high. I love the way the islands of grass recede, and the sky is reflected in the spaces between them. There is a feeling of stillness created by the calm water, the long grasses, and the reflections of the grasses on the water beneath them.

The connection you have with a place is the first thing that will make your future painting interesting to the viewer. If something about a scene arrests you, look at it carefully and think about what it is that intrigues you so much. What are the things about it that you would like to communicate with the viewer?

### Shape and aspect

The first stage of composition is deciding the shape of the painting and the aspect from which you will view it. Long and narrow, or square? High viewpoint or low viewpoint? Lots of sky or minimal sky? Use your camera to help you decide what shape works best.

For this composition, I took lots of photos from different angles and cropped them on my phone afterwards. I decided that a squarish shape with a low viewpoint worked best. I wanted the emphasis to be on the pattern of the islands rather than the sky.

### Editing

Next, I looked at the photo more closely and decided how I could edit it so that the painting was more interesting than the photograph. This subject might seem a little daunting, because there is quite a lot going on. Your eye might be distracted

by the many blades of grass, the clouds in the sky, and the multiple islands. I did a quick sketch of the scene (below) and made a few changes and simplifications that I thought would serve to make the final painting more striking. Here are a few of my edits:

- 1 A simplified sky with just a few wisps of clouds. I wanted the emphasis to be on the placement of the islands and the grasses, and complicated cloud patterns would be too distracting.
- 2 Simplified grasses. The shadows beneath the grass could convey the fact that there are many blades of grass without me having to paint every one of them.
- 3 I decided that the houses on the distant bank were unnecessary.
- 4 I left out the branches framing the photograph, as I felt that they were unnecessary and distracting.
- 5 The group of trees in the narrowest island towards the horizon line was too central. The rule of thirds would work well here. I decided to push the group of trees over to the right a little and make the trees at the far right smaller.



▲ In this composition, the foreground takes more of a starring role. If I had decided to work from this photo, I would have focused on the texture of the foreground grasses and emphasised the interesting pattern made by the islands in the middle ground

### Atmosphere

When I took the photograph, it was a calm, still, clear morning and I think the photo conveys this. In my painting, though, I wanted to give a heightened sense of this so that the atmosphere reads loud and clear. If I squint and look at the photograph, I can see that the colours



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- ◀ 1 Sky and background water
- ◀ 2 Distant bank
- ◀ 3 Background grasses
- ◀ Middle ground grasses
- ◀ Foreground grasses
- ◀ 4 Foreground water
- ◀ 5 Reflections in water
- ◀ 6 Dark areas under the grasses

▲ A colour study helps you to discover useful colours for the finished painting

**KEY**

- 1 Cerulean + cobalt blue
- 2 Sky colours + a little alizarin crimson + ultramarine blue
- 3 Cadmium yellow + a small amount of yellow ochre + cobalt, cerulean and ultramarine blue. Lots of water at the

top, adding more pigment as you arrive at the foreground grasses. More yellows in the paint mixture at the top; more blues in the paint mixture at the bottom. A tiny streak of cadmium red was added to the mix at the top and left to blend in.

- 4 Ultramarine blue + burnt sienna
- 5 Ultramarine blue + burnt sienna + alizarin crimson
- 6 A more concentrated mix of ultramarine blue + burnt sienna + alizarin crimson

on the foreground are much richer and warmer than those in the background. If I push this contrast even further in my painting, not only will more atmosphere be added, but the horizon will be

pushed back and the foreground will come forward more.

**Colour**

A colour study (above), where you figure out what colours to use in your painting, is a useful thing to do at this stage. Here I divided an area of watercolour paper into sections and used a medium flat brush to apply the paint. The size of the sections roughly corresponded to the amount of a particular colour that would be used in the painting. Here are a few points to bear in mind:

- 1 Mixing greens can be challenging so it's a good idea to play around with this on your palette and an extra sheet of paper until you mix the kind of greens with which you are satisfied.
- 2 In order to push the sense of atmosphere, use more water in the background areas and add more pigment to your mix of paint and water as you move towards the foreground areas.
- 3 Notice how there is a full range of tonal values here from light to dark. Watercolour paintings can sometimes look washed-out, because people often tend to stay in the middle-value range. Remember that light values have lots of

water and a small amount of pigment, and darker values have lots of pigment and less water. In terms of the consistency of the puddles of paint and water you mix on your palette, think: tea – milk – cream.

I hope you enjoy tackling this challenge. I look forward to seeing your paintings on the painting project area of PaintersOnline and see you next month for my step-by-step demonstration of the scene. [IP](#)



▲ Paint consistency. Think tea – milk – cream

**SHOW YOUR WORK**

How did you get on? Please send a jpeg image of your finished painting to dawn@tapc.co.uk along with a few lines on how you found this project, for inclusion on the painting project area of our website, PaintersOnline.

*Rachael Grimm*

Find out more about Rachael and her work by visiting [www.rachaelgrimm.com](http://www.rachaelgrimm.com)