Sunrise

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Defining the Focal Point

These projects demonstrate the thought process behind the composition design of two paintings that have strong focal points. You'll begin each painting using your own reference sketches. In the first project, you'll use Photoshop to paint an image that has a limited color palette, and then you'll create a sunlight effect on a layer and composite it using a transparent layer mode to enhance the focal point. For the next project, you'll create a blended pastel painting in Painter, and learn creative painting and composition techniques such as underpainting, color modulation, and lighting effects.

I painted Sunrise *in Photoshop using custom brushes and my favorite Wacom tablet and pen. The painting was inspired by the courageous fishermen who take their boats out through the challenging surf in Baja California.*

In addition to referring to reference sketches for inspiration, I remembered carefully observing the light at the time of day and how it subtly revealed the forms. I chose a limited palette of colors that helped to establish a dramatic feeling in the painting. For Along Tomales Bay, *I was inspired by the beautiful design of waterways in the marshes near Tomales Bay in northern California. For a calm, restful feeling, I used a cooler color theme of mostly blues and greens, and I used Painter's Pastels and Blenders brushes to paint smooth, soft color transitions.*

My approach to both paintings was interpretive rather than photo-realistic. To achieve the painted effects, I did a lot of experimentation with both color and brushwork. In both paintings, I used traditional composition techniques, and designed both compositions to lead the viewer's eye into the paintings.

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Strengthening the Focal Point in a Photoshop Painting

Sketcher, Normal mode, used in various sizes and opacities

Gouache, Normal mode at 100% (left), and Multiply mode at 25% opacity (right)

The inspirational colored pencil sketch

ARTIST'S MATERIALS

Tablet: Medium-soft pressure

Program: Photoshop

Brushes:

• Sketcher: customized with pressure response and texture for loose, expressive line work

• Gouache: customized with a sampled dab and pressure response

• Gouache: modified for applying transparent color

• Eraser: used to scratch and "feather" highlight areas

For *Sunrise*, I designed a composition with the focal point off center, with beams of sunlight shining down, focused on the central boat. To invite the viewer's eye into the composition, I painted the light area on the lower right, with the light area moving up through to the central boat and deeper into the composition. To create tension and a more dramatic composition, I built the inverted "v" shape of the light from above shining on the fishermen in the boats. Also, I used atmospheric perspective (less contrast, detail, and color saturation in the distant hills) to give more attention to the boats that had more detail and contrast.

1 **Assembling references and designing the composition.** To begin, draw conventional sketches and scan them, or if you prefer, draw directly in Photoshop using the "Sketcher" brush you made in Chapter 9.*

If you've scanned a drawing, cut the image to a layer* so you can lower the opacity of the reference and use it as a guide while tracing and reworking the composition.

If you choose to sketch directly in Photoshop, open a new file and add a new transparent layer for your sketch. Drawing on the layer gives you more flexibility with how you incorporate your sketch into the image.

The colored pencil sketch I used as a loose reference for the beach
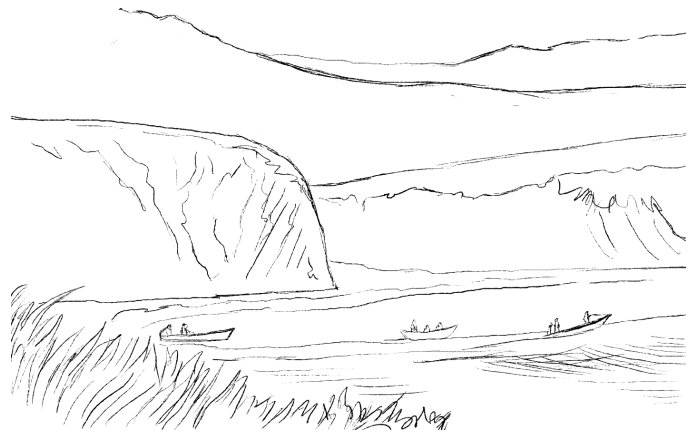
The digital sketch shows the reworked cliffs, boats, and foreground.

I drew the colored pencil studies shown above on location in my 8 x 10-inch travel sketchbook. The blue and yellow sketch notes the inspiration for the color theme and the composition, including the sun rays, which help to define the focal point. The brown sketch notes more detail on the hills and cliffs. After scanning the blue drawing into Photoshop at 300 pixels per inch at actual size, I cropped the scan.* I used the brown drawing for reference but did not bring it into my image as a layer.

I liked my references, but I wanted to change the cliffs, boats, and foreground, and combine some of the elements from both sketches. To design the composition,

I added a new layer and drew a black-and-white sketch using the "Sketcher" brush. As you see in the digital sketch above, I have opened up the right foreground area and have moved the boats down in the image. I used the second sketch as a reference while loosely sketching the forms of the cliffs and hills.

For Painter users. If you don't have Photoshop, you can follow along with this project using the Fine Point variant of Pens to draw the digital sketch. For the color painting, try using the Gouache brushes, reducing their opacity when needed to achieve the semitransparent washes. For truly transparent washes, try the Digital Watercolor brushes. You can paint the transparent washes on a new layer, with its composite method set to Gel. (The performance of the brushes will not be identical.)

You can see the golden base color in this image.

This image shows the shadow color painted on the distant hills.

2 Adding a base color to the study. The yellow-gold base color is the underlying color for my image; it sets the mood for this painting with golden light. To give your image a base color, add a new layer and position it directly under your sketch layer. (I named my layer "gold base.") You can use the Gouache brush* that you made in Chapter 9 (or the Oil Medium Wet Flow default preset, scaled to a larger size) and rough color in by hand using your stylus, or you can fill the layer with color by choosing Edit > Fill.

3 Laying in the shadows. To achieve atmospheric perspective where the far away hills recede into the distance, use less contrast than you will use in the foreground and focal point areas. Because the painting depicts sunrise with a lot of dark areas (except the area illuminated by the sun), there will not be many high-contrast details in the darker shadow areas. (I painted the details in the shadows using subtle changes in value.) For this time of day, I recommend using a limited color palette. Choose a dark purple or brown that will work well with the gold base. (I chose purple because it would mix with the golden colors and create a variety of browns, when color was added using a low-opacity brush.)

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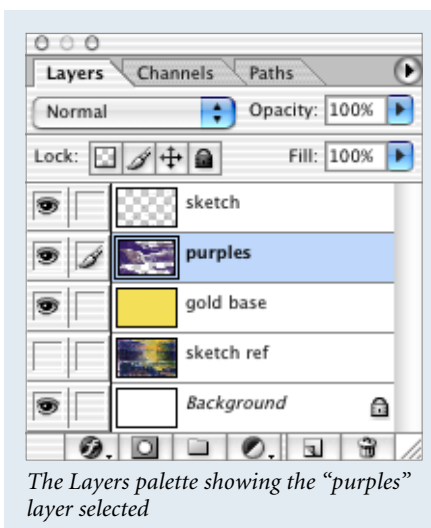* atmosphere. . . pages 78–87
* Gouache brush. . . page 117

Blocking in the shadow areas on the painting
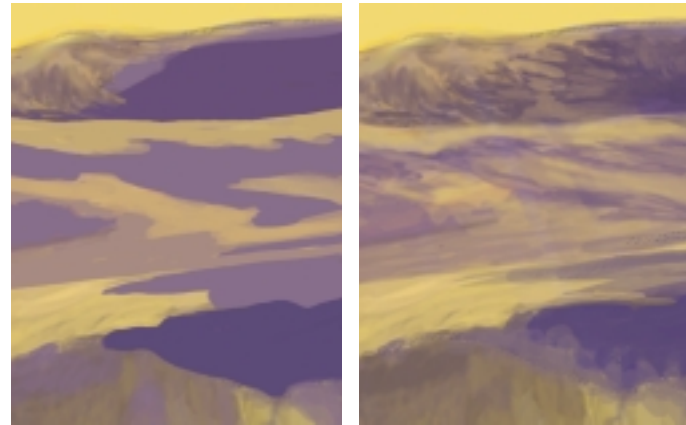
Painting glazes on the hills using brushes in Multiply and Normal modes

Add a new layer and position it directly above the gold base layer in the Layers palette. (I named my layer "purples.") Using the Gouache brush in Normal mode and in various sizes, paint brushstrokes to block in the darkest shadow areas, progressing from the back of your composition (farther away) to the mid-ground and foreground.

The Layers palette showing the "purples" layer selected

4 **Adding subtle detail to the hills.** To paint transparent color on the darker areas of the hills, use a small Gouache brush in Multiply mode, at a low opacity from 10–30%. To paint light color over dark, use the Gouache brush in Normal mode, at a low opacity from 10–30%. The low opacity allows you to build up color slowly, as I did, and to apply the color in glazes, much like traditional watercolor. I varied the colors, using both warm (red-purple), cool (blue-purple), and shades of gold.

Painting the forms of the hills, with the sketch layer hidden

Adding small brushstrokes to rough-in the cliff forms

Painting redder colors on the sky

5 Painting the cliffs, beach, and sky. Next, paint the cliff and hill forms in the middle ground. Continue to use the Gouache brush at a low opacity in Multiply mode when you want to paint transparent washes. Using brighter colors and slightly more contrast than you used for the distant hills helps to bring these landforms more forward in the composition. (I used more saturated purple and golden colors.) When painting the purples over the gold, you will see many variations of purples and browns, as the low opacity and the Multiply mode work together to "mix" the colors as you paint. When you'd like to paint with a semi-opaque paint, use Normal mode and a reduced opacity. (I used 30–40% opacity for these kinds of strokes, like the angled strokes shown in the left side of the image above). Often, I sampled color directly from the image (press the Alt/Option key to temporarily switch from the Brush tool to the Eyedropper) and then continued to paint with the brush.

Still working on the same layer, I added form and detail to the low-lying cliffs on the right side of the painting and to the beach. I also added red-orange color to the sky and carried it down onto the side of the taller hill.

In preparation for painting the grass in the foreground, I added a new layer and then used loose strokes while painting a medium-toned purple base color. Next, I painted deeper tones using darker purple colors. When painting the grass, keep your hand loose and make soft, curved strokes from the bottom to the top of each blade. To paint a thinner tip on the grass blade, reduce the pressure as you finish the stroke.

LEARN MORE ABOUT. . .

★ adding a new layer. . . page 26
★ saturation. . . page 42

The foreground blocked in, and the in-progress water

You can see the general highlights on the central boats.

6 **Painting the foreground details.** Now it's time to paint the water and add interest to the fishing boats. For the darker areas on the water, use the Gouache brush at a lower opacity in Multiply mode, as you did for the hills. When you add darker detail to the boats, you can also use the brush in Multiply mode.

To paint light color over dark when adding form and highlights to the fishermen and boats, use the Gouache brush in Normal mode. I used a small brush, between 5–7 pixels, and low opacities from 7–15% to paint soft details and highlights.

In areas where I had applied rougher brushstrokes, I used the Smudge tool to smear and blend them into the image (for instance, the blended strokes on the side of the cliff, and the foreground grass).

Now that the painting was nearly complete, I deleted the digital rough sketch layer and the scanned sketch reference layer (from step 1). I did not want to incorporate them into my image.

You can see the highlights on the left boat and detail on the water and grass, as well as the smudged and blended areas on the cliff.
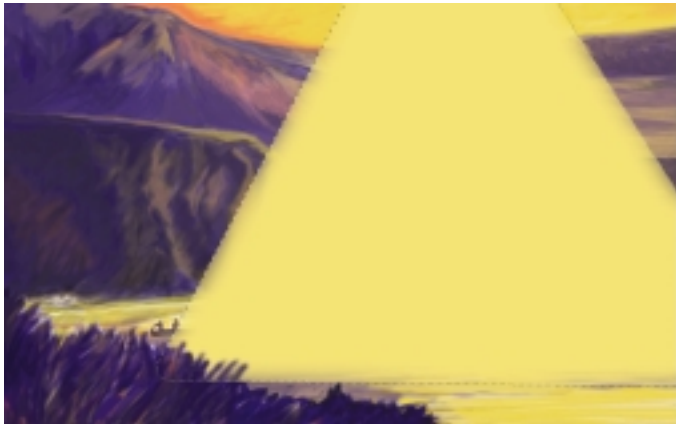
The sunlight layer showing the active selection and the yellow fill

The sunlight layer with the blend mode set to Soft Light

7 Adding the sunbeams and details. Now that the landscape elements are modeled, it's time to enhance the focal point of your painting. My inspiration was the moment of sunshine bursting over the hill that illuminated the bay and the fishermen at sunrise. The sun rays help to enhance the focal point—in this case, the fishermen heading out in their boats.

To have the most flexibility when painting the sunbeams, add a new layer and position it at the top of the layer stack. Using the Polygon Lasso tool, make a selection as shown in the image above, and then give the selection soft edges by feathering it. Choose Select > Feather, and enter a value between 20–30 pixels. Now sample a light golden yellow from the sky using the Eyedropper tool, and fill your selection by choosing Edit > Fill, using Normal mode at 100%. To give your sunlight layer a subtle transparency, choose Soft Light from the Blend mode menu on the Layers palette. You might also want to experiment with the other blend modes.

The transparency effect was nice; however, I wanted to add more interest to the sunbeams. So I added a layer mask to the sunlight layer and used a soft brush to paint long strokes on the layer mask to hide part of the sunlight layer.

To add a layer mask to your layer, click the Add a Mask button at the bottom of the Layers palette. Choose the Airbrush Soft Round 65 preset from the Brushes palette. Choose black, click on the Add Layer Mask button on the Layers palette, and paint on your mask (adjust the brush opacity if needed). Your image updates to show the area hidden by the mask. Working with layer masks is flexible and nondestructive to your painting. You can repaint the layer mask until you have the sun rays as you like them. To bring more attention to the leading boat, I added a new layer and painted a few more small sun rays coming down in front of the boat.

Now step back and study your painting. Is there an area where you need more or less contrast? Do you see

LEARN MORE ABOUT. . .

★ layer masks. . . pages 198, 207

The nearly final image showing the sunlight effect and the sunrays painted near the front boat


*The final sunlight effect on the front boat*

details you want to refine? After taking a good look at my painting, I used a small brush to add subtle detail to the fishermen in the central boat, and I defined some of the edges (on the "purples" layer). I also painted a few small sun rays around each boat on the "small sunrays" layer.

In this technique, you learned ideas for enhancing the focal point in your images. A Painter technique follows on the next page.
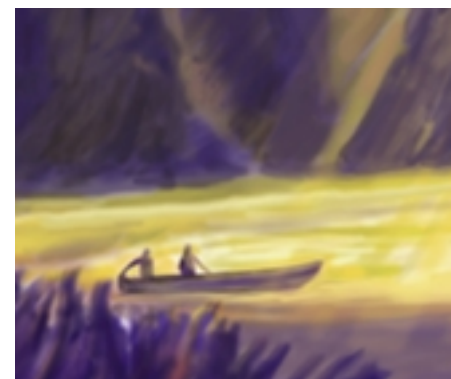

The details on the fishermen in the center boat
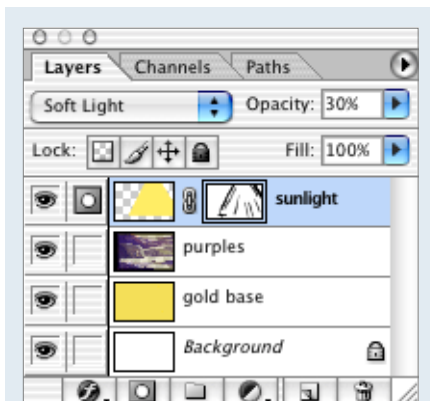
The Layers palette shows the layer mask on the "sunlight" layer selected. You can see the black paint on the layer mask, which hides part of the imagery on the layer.
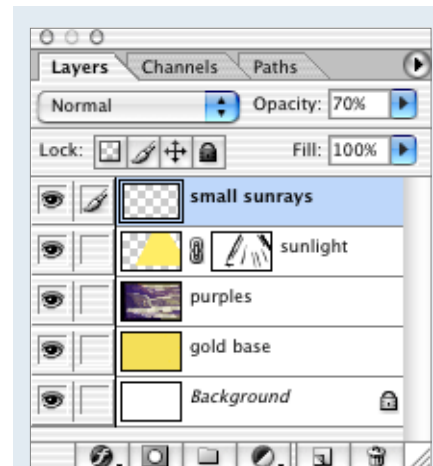
The Layers palette shows the "small sunrays" layer selected.

The sunlight on the fishermen and boat