

A PAINTING BEGINS ...

Anna - a watercolor portrait

Dateline: Wednesday, June 17,
Manila, Philippines

I'm in a hotel room. The internet connection is nonexistent. Likely it has wandered too far into the meaner streets of Manila and shan't be returning any time soon.

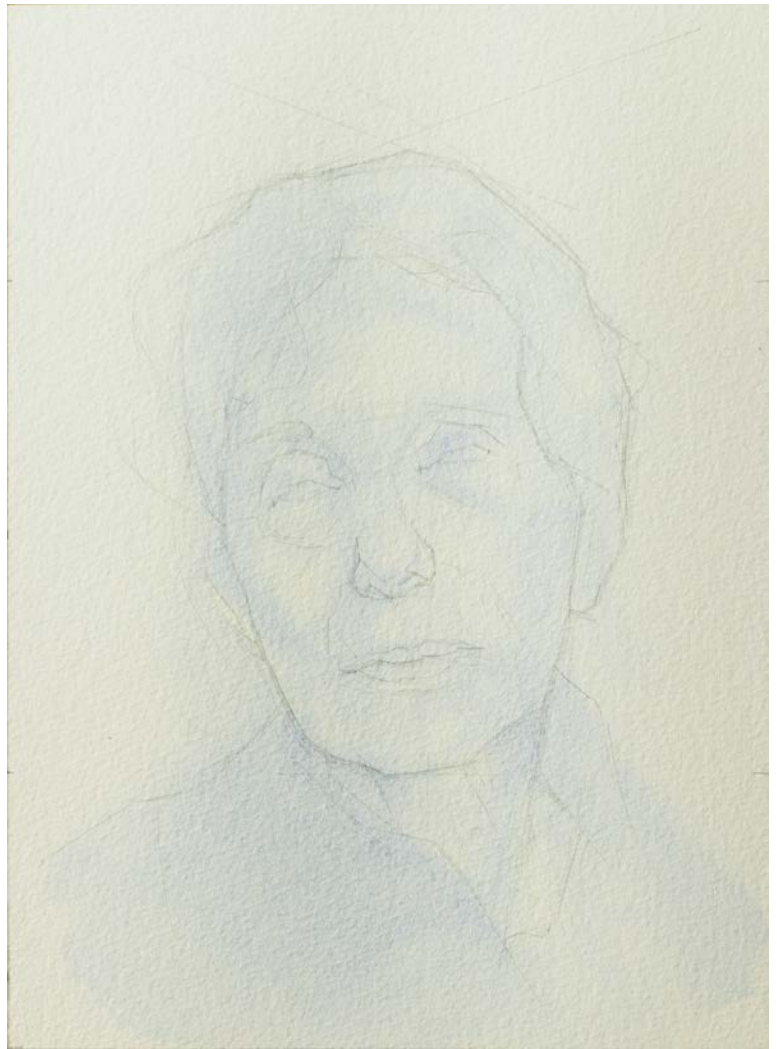
It's too hot and muggy to venture outside. And rather than spend my afternoon shooing aside hideously insistent urchins and gamines, all in the indentured service of some slaving fagin, I'll bet, I find solace and happiness in painting.

I travel light now. My suitcase serves as a ready easel and there's always a Gideon's Bible or two to adjust the height.

My canvas (the painter's jargon for pictorial dimension and shape) is 22x30 cm. It is the complementary shape of the dynamic $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle. Like color, shape too has its complements.

Color and shape are implicit as to whether or not a painting is successful. Everything else is subservient. Not unimportant of course, but there is a hierarchy to the layer cake that is painting.

For some reason this canvas strikes me as a melancholic shape. I don't know why. Just me, I guess.



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A few constructive geometric placements and Anna is sketched directly with a light touch onto my medium weight cold-pressed Arches watercolor paper with a 2H graphite pencil. That damn jowl promises some drawing misery ahead.

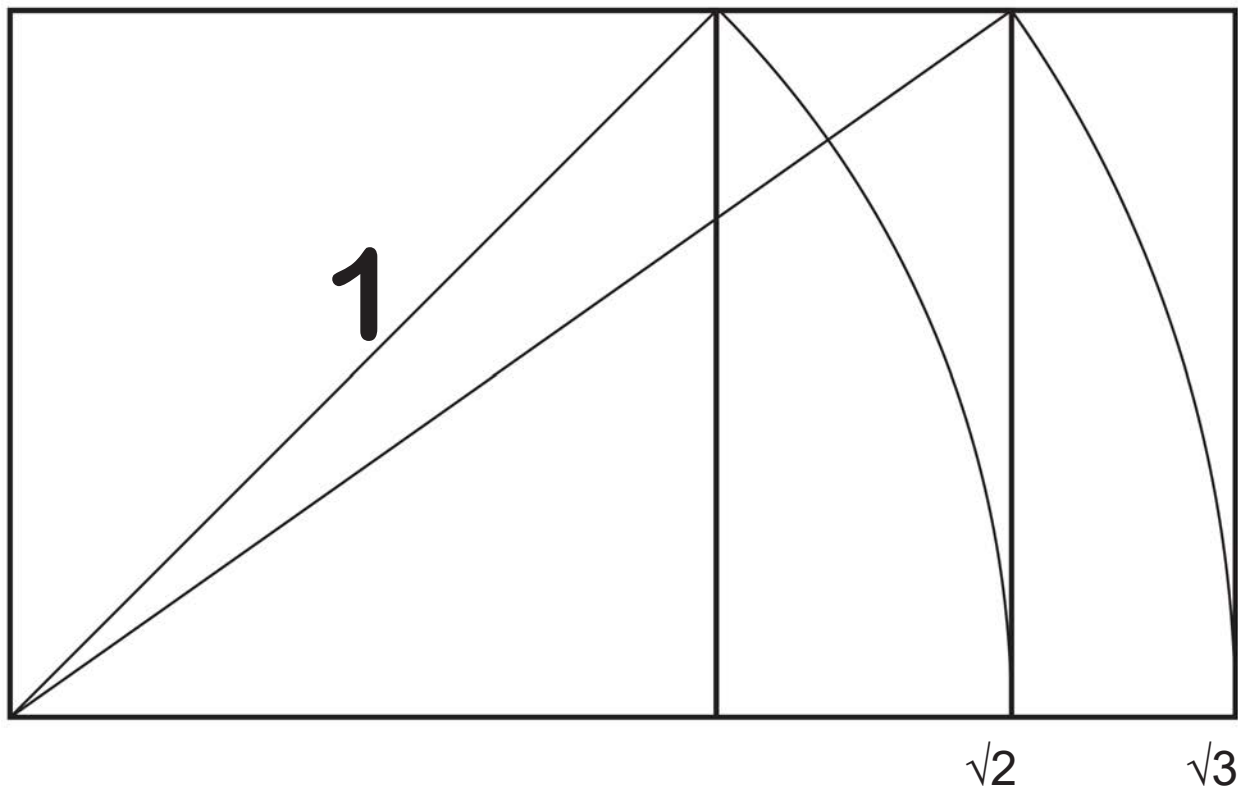
Cobalt blue, applied lightly wet-into-wet, infers the planar elements and initiates the unifying of the figure/ground relationship.

A portrait painting is much more than the image of a face. It's expressive impact is to a large extent incumbent upon the design of the painting's elements: composition, notan, color, drawing, etc.

A painting's progress is one of decisions. Good decisions. Bad decisions, too. It is the process of painting—the triumphs, the failures, the scar tissue—that imbues the portrait with a shared humanity. An increasingly tenuous humanity in our brave new artificial world.

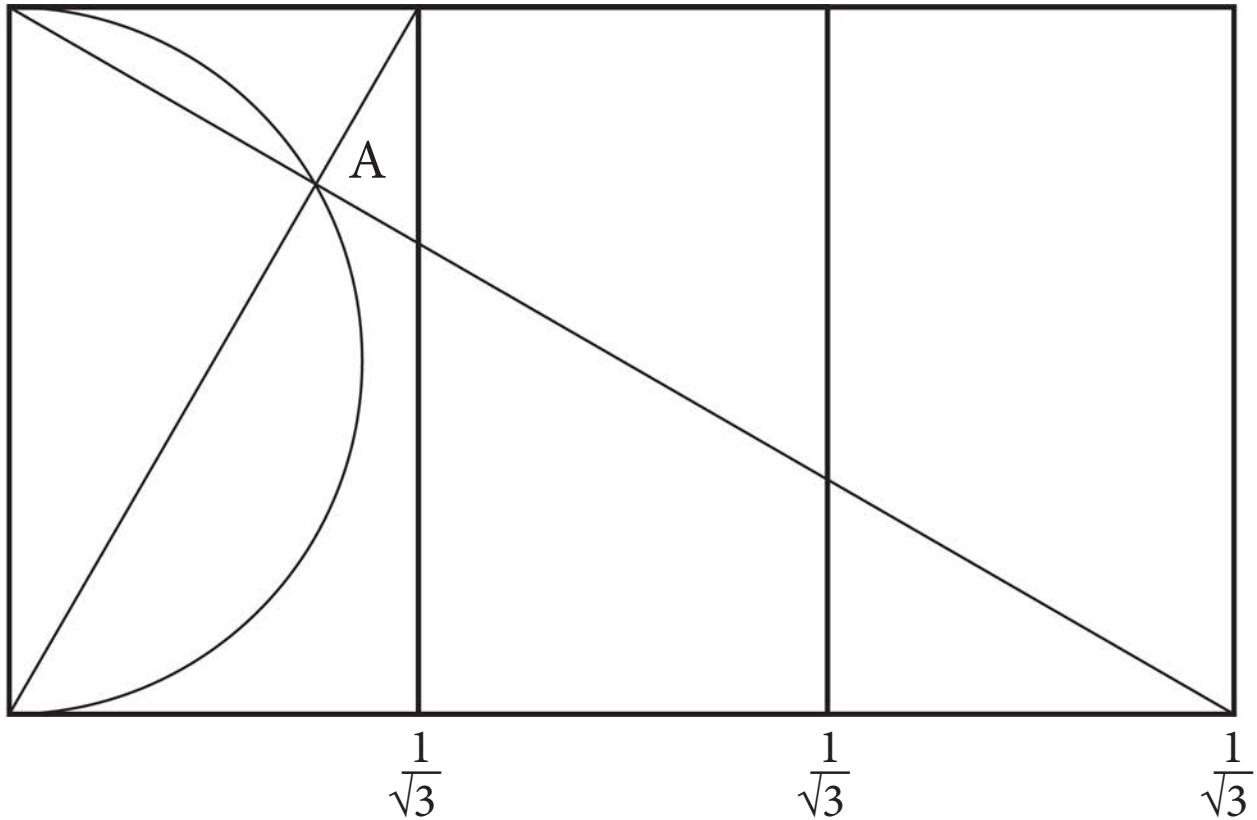
To hold onto our humanity we'll need every tool at our disposal.

In painting, dynamic rectangles and their deconstructive interiority of pictorial divisions (my o' my, that's a mouthful!) are a direct conduit to the engagement of the viewer's unconscious mind. Dynamic shape and color grab the viewer by the gizzards. It's what knocks your socks off. Narrative and drawing are secondary elements.



Dynamic rectangles begin with the square (1). A diagonal drawn thru the square and dropped establishes the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle (proportion: 1.4142).

A diagonal drawn thru the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle and, once again, dropped fixes the $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle (proportion: 1.732).

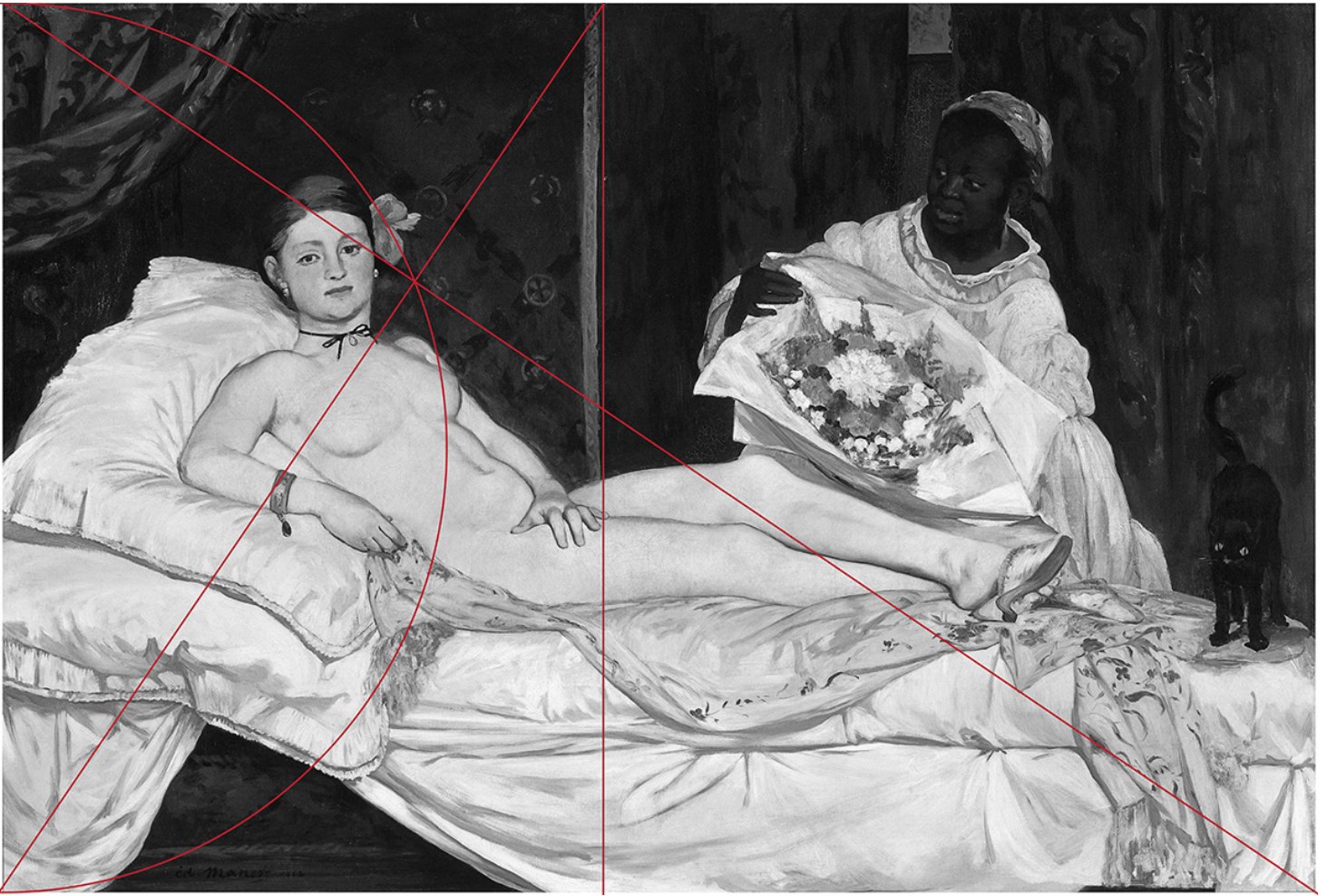


In addition to the *Rabatment* (applying a square onto the end of a canvas), the *Reciprocal* is a powerful compositional tool for establishing harmonious divisions of space.

The $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle has three reciprocals. The $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle has two. The $\sqrt{4}$ (double square) has four and $\sqrt{5}$ has five. It's quite biblical. One begets the other. The reciprocal is a mirror image of the larger rectangle.

To construct the reciprocal render a primary diagonal and apply a semi-circle onto the end of the canvas. Draw another diagonal through the intersection point (A) and continue upward to the top of the canvas. Repeat for the other two.

The $\sqrt{3}$'s reciprocal is 0.5774. Divide 1 into 1.732 = 0.5774.



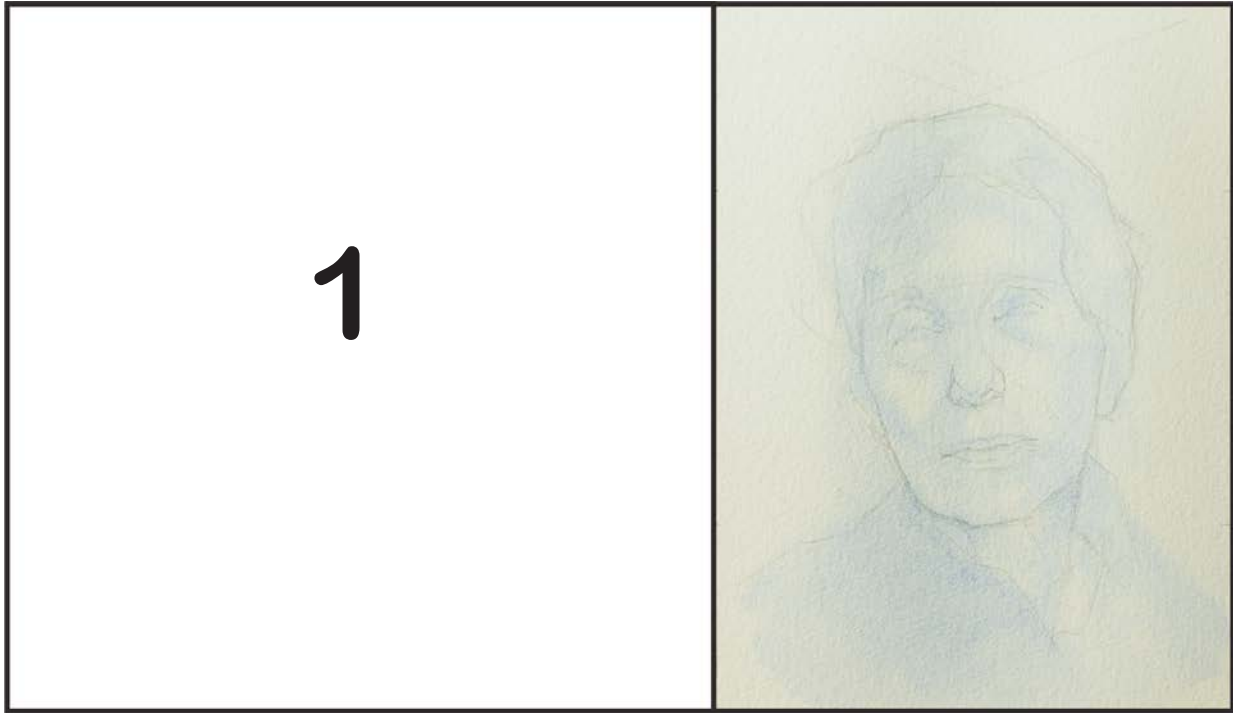
Édouard Manet applied the same construction to *Olympia*, 1863 to powerful effect.

Consider this early study of *Olympia* and one can readily see the importance of placement and pictorial divisions in painting. The study falls flat.

As with everything else in painting, dynamic symmetry (applied design theory and the harmonious divisions of space) alone will not guarantee success. Every painting demands its own solution.

A simplicity rendered through a wall of complexity is often the surest pathway.





$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{3}}$$

For *Anna* I felt that the complementary shape of the $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle is a good candidate. Basically the complementary shape is defined by placing a rabatement (a square : 1) onto the end of the $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle. The remainder defines the complement.

For even a small painting sketching out the geometry is cumbersome. Hence, I grab a calculator. Here's the math—follow me with a calculator in hand, don't just read through otherwise your eyes will glaze over faster than a Monday morning donut:

Divide 1.732 (that's $\sqrt{3}$ which has 3 reciprocals) into 3 = 0.5774.

Subtract 0.5774 from 1 = 0.4226 (that's the complement's reciprocal value)

Divide 0.4226 into 1 = 2.3663.

Subtract 1 from 2.3663 = 1.3663. That's the proportion of $\sqrt{3}$'s complement.

So ... for my 22 cm canvas I multiply that by 1.3663 which gives me 30 cm. Voila!

Henceforth, *Anna* is 22 x 30 cm.

Once my watercolor paper is measured out to 22x30 cm and taped down, that $\sqrt{3}$ complementary rectangle is deconstructed using only a few, albeit powerful, tools of dynamic symmetry.

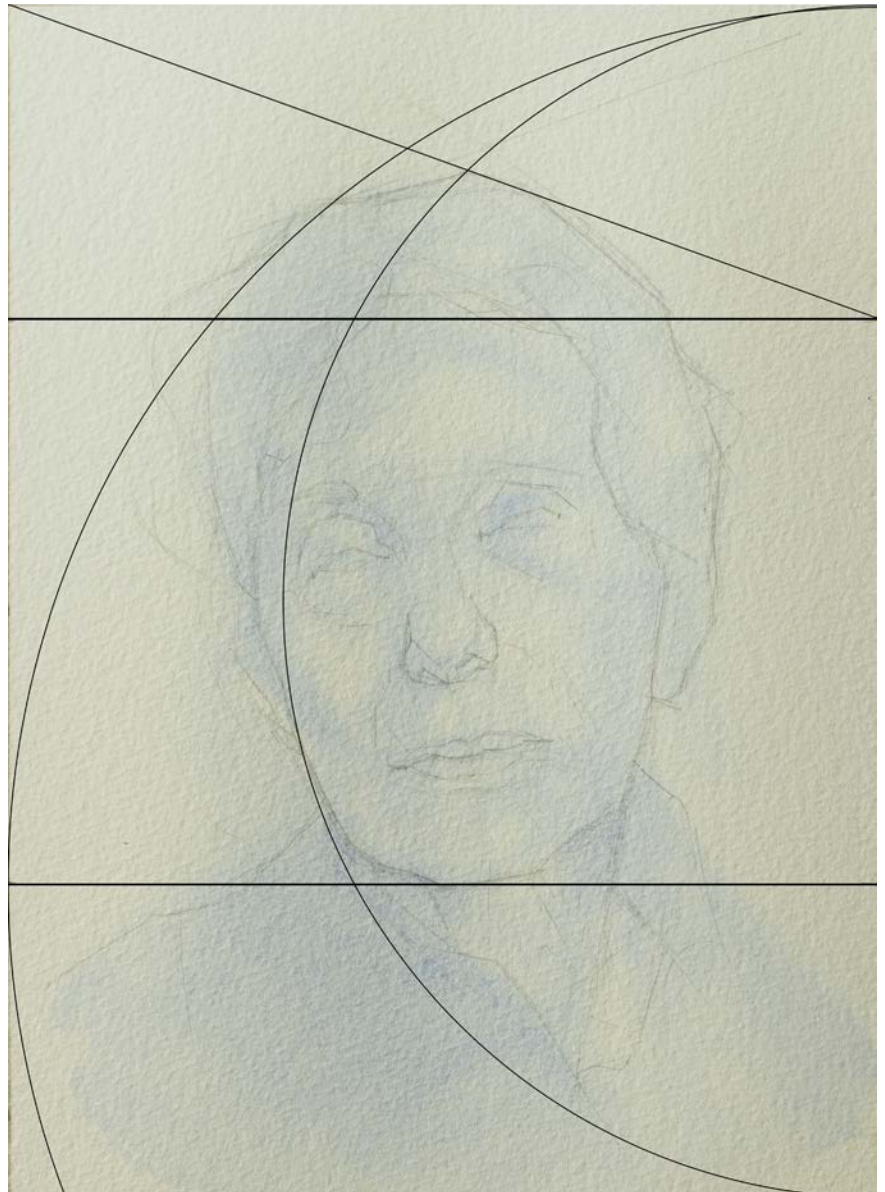
The placement of Anna's head within the canvas is critical. The head's placement must be concordant to the canvas. Unity sits atop the hierarchy to painting.

It takes some playing around with a geometry set, well, just a straight edge and a compass, to first work out a good solution and then to distill it to its simplest and most direct application.

I stress the element of PLAY. Often it takes some work, sometimes it just presents itself. Those are the good days.

From there the head is lightly sketched with a 2H graphite pencil. There's no two ways around it; watercolor portraits demand a high skillset. Corrections are fraught with potential catastrophies—even a barely microscopic tear in the paper's surface will scar a wash.

The drawing established, room temperature water is generously brushed onto the paper and, with a very, very & very light touch, a cobalt blue wash infers the planar structures while initiating the unification of the figure/ground relationship.



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UNDERPAINTING: WATERCOLOR PORTRAITS

Part 2 : Anna

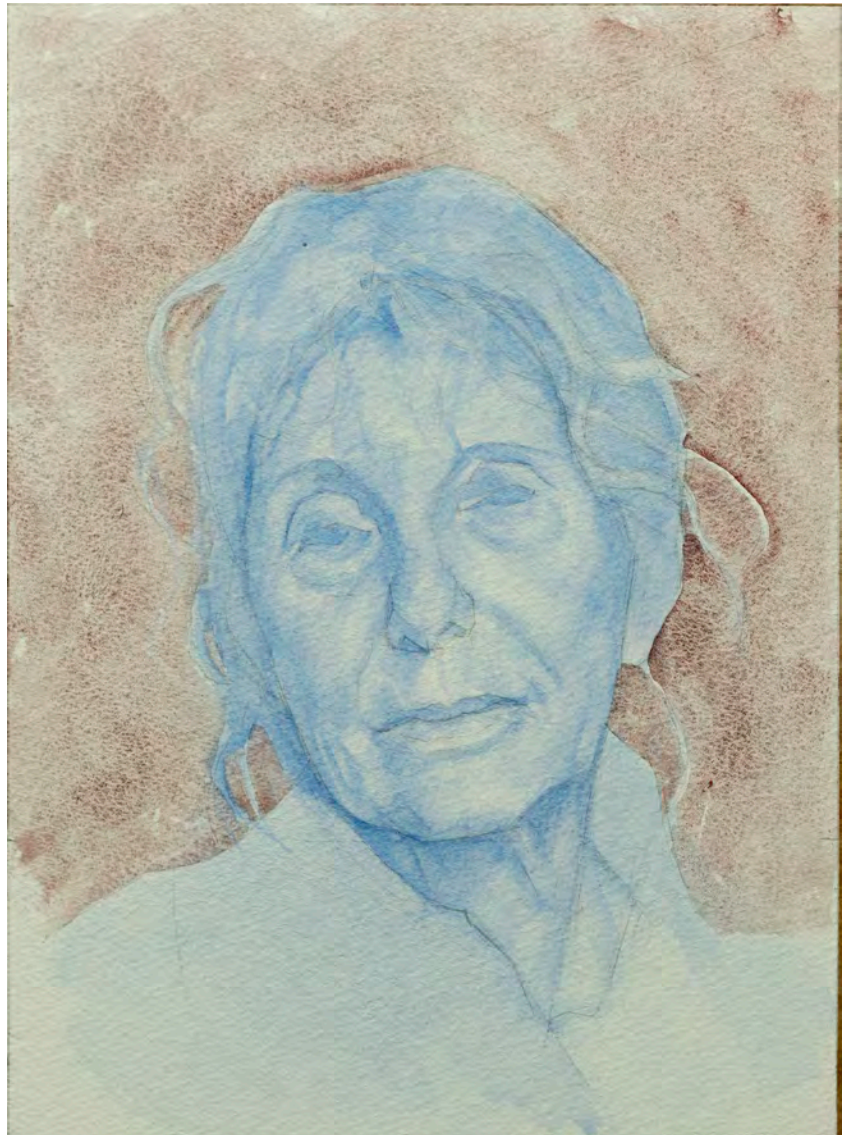
Watercolor is a reductive process
— light to dark / cool to warm.

An initial structuring of the facial forms with cobalt blue serves several criteria: It is a cool hue that infers the underlying fascia of flesh. Fascia is a thin, translucent, whitish membrane with a wet, glistening surface. It looks something like a sheer, slightly opaque film of plastic wrap.

Flesh is somewhat translucent presenting interspersed flickerings of cool and warm that are dependant upon mood, age, gender and, of course, the lighting of the sitter.

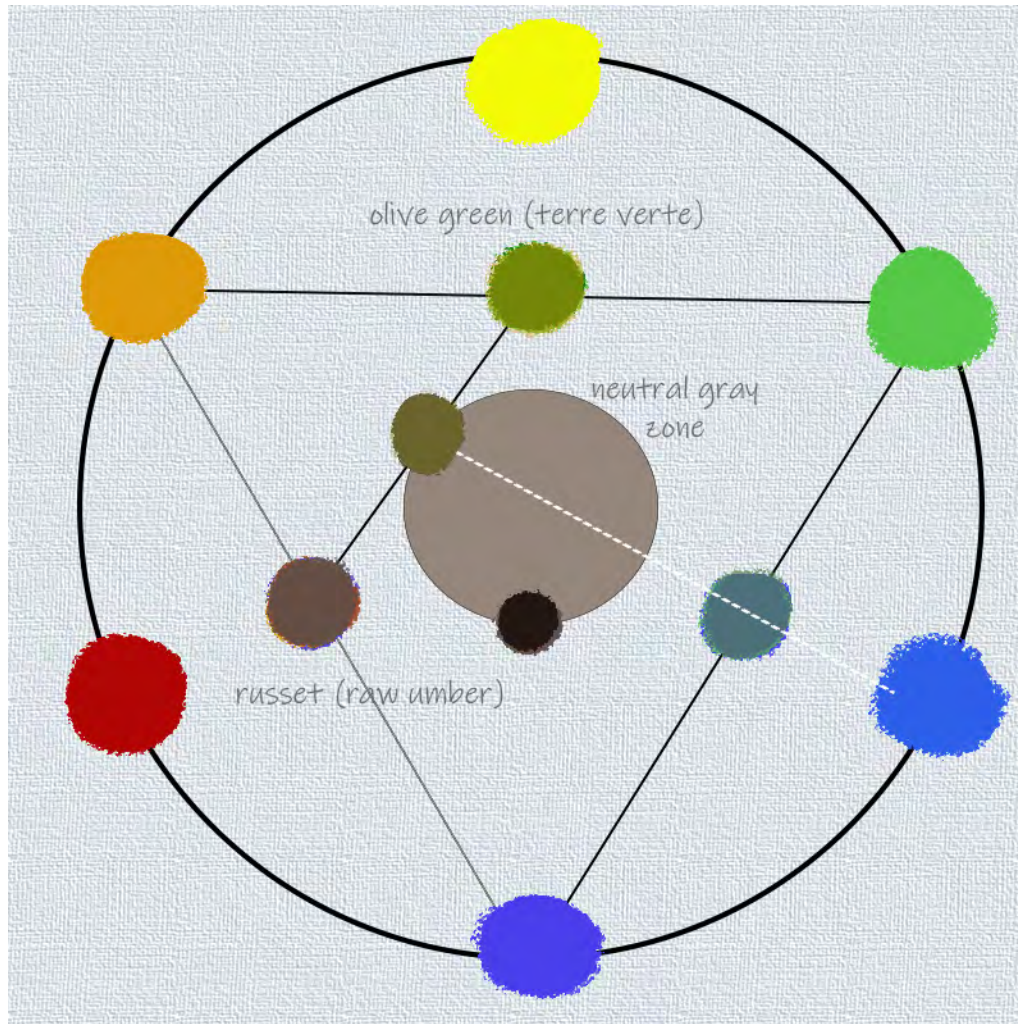
In both watercolor and oil painting (I cannot speak of acrylic; it is a soulless medium for me and I never use them) an effective underpainting is an optical grisaille that is rendered to effect a mother-of-pearl tone. Thus giving off a soft luminescence.

In painting flesh tones with watercolor the cobalt blue will be overlaid with its Primary Compound Complement. A glaze of terre verte with a touch of raw umber works quite well amongst others.



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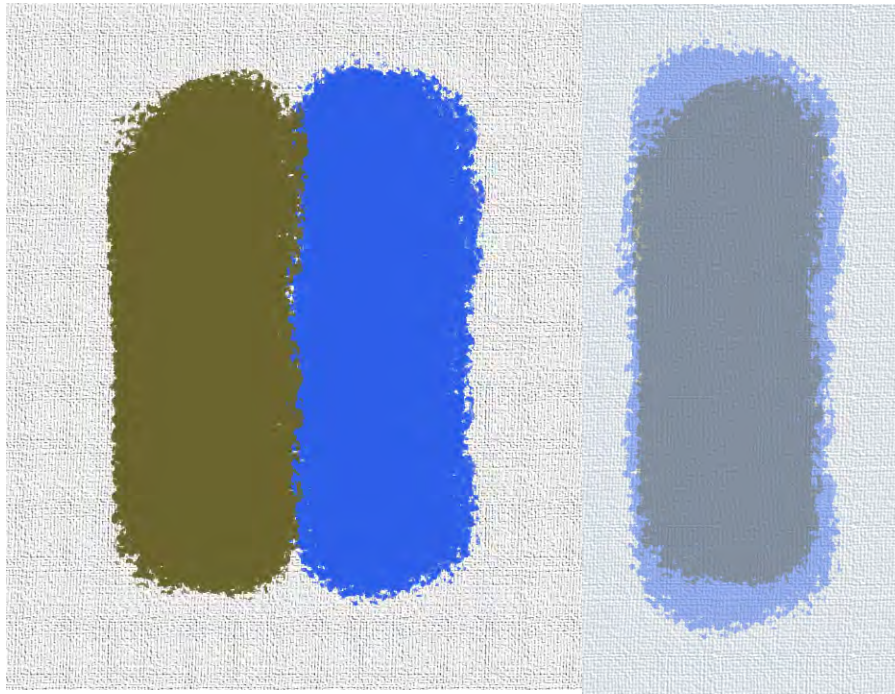
Here's the theory:



From the three primary colors (Red, Yellow, Blue) three secondary colors are produced (Green, Orange, Violet). And from the three secondary colors three tertiary colors are made: Orange + Green gives Olive Green (terre verte); Orange + Violet begets Russet (Raw Umber comes pretty close) and, last but not least Green + Violet produces Slate.

In the middle of the color wheel lies the Neutral Gray Zone. It is a mix of the three primary colors in visually equal parts.

Two tertiaries will produce a Compound hue. For our purposes Terre Verte and Raw Umber (just a touch though) produces a hue that resembles meconium which is the Primary Compound Complement (PCC). [**P**Primary : **C**Compound : Two tertiaries / traverse the Neutral Gray Zone and, voila! the **C**omplementary value.



Placed side-by-side, Blue and it's PCC, an elegant hue is rendered.

In watercolor glazing the PCC (terre verte or green earth plus a touch of raw umber) over the cobalt blue produces an optical grisaille with a mother-of-pearl translucency. I'll go into this in Part 3.

Needless to say, the Photoshopped version of the grisaille wherein I endeavored to mimic watercolor is lacking in both Oomph and beauty. There's theory and then there's practice.



The same thinking is found in Ruben's *The Lion Hunt*, 1615. It's in the Met in New York.

Over a Yellow Ochre imprimatura charcoal dust suspended in rabbit skin glue is lightly streaked onto the canvas.

Yellow and Black are Primary Compound Complements.



It is advisable to initiate the figure/ground relationship at this early stage.

Potter's Pink, invented in the late 18th century, is a super-granulating pigment that reticulates quite nicely offering up a delicate patterning.

Potter's Pink when mixed with Cerulean Blue or Raw Sienna, amongst others, produces useful grayish tones.

'Tis a wondrous hue for watercolor. Not so much for oils. Acrylics we won't even mention.

To be continued ...



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