PORTRAIT PAINTER

In the December 2024 issue:

🖌 Gérôme vs. Manet

🖌 Painting Alla Prima!

$\mathcal{A}$ Word ...

The December 2024 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER presents the academic painter Gérôme, in the illustrative corner, versus Manet, in the painter's corner.

The arena is a tondo, a circular canvas, predicated on Gérôme's *Head of a Child*.

And also the practice of painting Alla Prima!

Michael Britton
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*M*ateriality & Expression

Gérôme vs. Manet

Were it not for the outsized influence that Gérôme through his student, Charles Bargue, has on much of realist artists' training today, I would not bother with this polemic.

But I do bother simply because Gérôme's pedagogy is leading far too many artists' down the garden path.

There are essentially two modes of painting: the illustrative and the painterly.

Gérôme was an academic, illustrative painter. He presents the image as a colored-in drawing. Albeit well-suited to our pixilated age where everything is flatted to two-dimensional spectacle.

It goes without saying that Gérôme was a gifted and highly accomplished draughtsman. He knew his craft. Alas, in the final verdict, he was a technician and woefully out-of-step with the changing times.

He offered escapist, orientalist fare which garnered him accolades and laurels from officialdom, but also contributed to his fall from grace.

Gérôme's *Portrait of a Child*, 1841, and my 'copy' present a comparison of the illustrative and the painterly. Gérôme renders form with the elements of drawing. i.e., the facial features are articulated with line and the edges cross-hatched with delicate strokes.

I chose a sculptural path wherein my paint is applied thickly in the lights and modeled with both my palette knife and fingers as if working in clay. I exuberate in the materialty and abstract structural surface of paint.

The resulting effect owes as much to personal timbre as it does to painting mode. Personality, too, takes its turn upon the canvas: Gérôme was buttoned-up and reserved, a proper 19th Century gentleman; I, however, am not.

And the time we live in also plays it part. Gérôme's time was an age of accelerating change. Technology and urban alienation was as much a part of Gerome's world as it is ours. Gérôme's world ended in the catastrophe of 1914.

Gérôme sought solace in a golden, orientalist world that never was. Manet, and his cohorts, cast a more gimlet eye upon the so-called Belle Époque. The good times.

Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Woman of Constantinople*, 1876

Whereas Gérôme wandered lost in the mists of ancient Constantinople offering his clientele escapist fare, Manet served up bitter dishes of pedestrian reality.

Worse, he disrupted the idea of what fine painting should be.

Manet did not appear out of nowhere. His work was informed by Velàzquez and Goya. Before him was Courbet. Ruffian and revolutionary whose rural nudes frolicked with dirty feet. Very much unlike Bougeaureau's nymphic, adolescent shepherdesses coyly entic- ing and entreating the viewer with spar- kling clean and pinkish toes.

I don't know about you, but whenever I ventured into a sheep field I quickly sank mid-calf in sheep shit. My toes were definitely not pinkishly clean. And I am a fastidious fellow.

* * *

Three women present the face of late 19th Century French painting. Edgar Degas' and Corot's muse was Emma Dobigny. An endearing but awful model given to song burst while posing.

Corot's other muse was the Italian beauty, Agostina Segatori, who for a short time was Van Gogh's lover. I guess Vincent wasn't that lonely.

Manet's muse, Victorine Meurent, posed in all of Manet's major paintings. She is the woman lunching in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, she is *Olympia*, 1863-5, and the distracted mother in *The Railway*, 1873.

Victorine was petit and ginger haired. Her nickname was La Crevette (the shrimp).

Victorine was both an accomplished musician and painter who was accepted into the Salon even in 1876 when Manet was rejected (I can well imagine the tension at that evening's dinner). This was no small accomplishment for a working class woman.

Eduoard Manet, *Victorine Meurent*
Left: 1862 Right: 1868

The earlier portrait of Victorine exemplifies Manet's flattened and intellectually coolish painting voice. The later portrait, it's attribution still questioned, is the more interesting in terms of this article.

The drawing feels to be from Manet's hand. The overpainting of the flesh tones is quite radical for its time. The rough hewn, sculptural brush work is exceptional and speaks of painting ahead of its time.

It is a small sketch, 40.5 X 32.4 cm, an experiment abandoned as far as Manet's portrait painting is concerned. Perhaps he scared the bejesus out of himself as artists sometimes do and rejected that pathway. The sculptural brushwork reappears in Manet's flower paintings that he painted on his deathbed. His legs amputated from complications of syphilis. A common affliction at that time.

The agenda in a recently completed Zoom workshop was to push students from an academic rendering of Gérôme's *Head of a Child* toward the lessons of Manet. With liberties, of course.

Learning to paint is, well, should be, a layered approach wherein each skill is developed one after the other cumulating in a singularity of expressive voice.

Flitting from one workshop to another garnering tidbits of information is the worst way of learning to paint. The brutal truth is you don't learn. Yet many beginners pursue this poor regimen.

Learning to accurately strike the BIG shape is the critical foundation. Everything builds upon that. And it is not as daunting as one might fear. The first issue is overall proportion: how wide, how tall..

Essentially, there are only three proportions you need to master. First is the square. Many, many 3/4 and profile heads present a square in terms of height and width.

Second, and third, is the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (Φ = 1.618, the number of the world's soul according to Plato) and the truncated $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles. With small variations every frontal portrait will ascribe to one or the other of these. Learn to recognize and strike these basic rectangles and you'll have crossed a major obstacle.

From there it is a matter of breaking down that BIG shape into smaller, corresponding shapes beginning with the overall light/dark pattern. That is the essence of working from General to Specific. In the November '24 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER I present a 55 minute HD video on how to begin the above pictured portrait.

With practice it takes about five to seven minutes to accurately hammer down the armature of arabesque and light/dark pattern. This is where the likeness and expression resides. There is no need for a preliminary drawing that will only enslave you.

As per the teachings of John Singer Sargent and his teacher Carolus-Duran, I paint through the eyes of a sculptor serving up the half-tones in the abstract.

Using a severely limited palette of four colours (white, yellow ochre, indian red and vine black) I mix up three half-tones. Light, middle light and a warmer dark light.

With only these three values I spot in the color/value notes as if they were colored pieces of clay.

The criteria of spotting color/value notes employs a trifecta of: 1. Select your value; 2. Place it; and 3. Shape it. Ideally with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical form.

And for the sweet love of jesus ... stay out of the darks! Only misery will come of that.

The tyrannical idea of painting dark to light is the academic approach of coloring-in the preliminary drawing which quite often results in false accents and relies on linear perspective and color devices to effect spatial dimension. I'm not a fan of that approach.

Needless to say, everything ... everything is incumbent upon the BIG shape. Get that wrong and do what Sargent did: Scrape it down and begin anew. Drawing errors are biblical. They begat a multitude of drawing errors.

I am generally loath to beginners placing the gaze, the irises, at this early stage. Without fail, beginners render the eyes too large and quickly become feature-centric. That's not a good thing.

Sargent would insist that his students spend a week painting a portrait without the features. 'That way you'll learn something about the modeling of the head.' Sargent was not one for sugar-coating critiques.

Now that the painting has progressed I expand my palette and focus on both developing form and temperature.

The lights are generally cool, the middle values are warm, and the dark lights more neutral.

It's important to keep in mind the big form modeling. The greater the distance from the light source, the weaker the light.

And then there are the issues of light facing planes and those that turn inward. Facial forms, for the most part, are convex.

Unity is the primary consideration. Don't wait too long before embarking on the figure/ground relationship (i.e., portrait/background).

Paintings are build upon contrasts of dark/light, color (complementaries and simultaneous contrast), cool/warm, thick/thin paint, rhythm, etc. And they must all come together in a dynamic expressive concordance.

DRAWING DRAPERY

Michael R. Britton

The drapery is roughed in. Essentially the folds of drapery are defined by their tension points and the weight of the fabric. There are basically seven drapery folds: the 2-point diaper fold, the pipe fold, the zigzag fold, the drop fold, the half-lock, the spiral and the inert.

My 46 page PDF workbook **Drawing Drapery is available for $4.95**.

The sculptural forms and temperature of the lights now established I delve into the darks.

Darks are mysterious and best rendered thinly. Some painters successfully articulate the darks with heavy strokes but it is a very fine line between brilliant mark-making and collapse.

Generally, the less rendered the dark passages the better. Their convex forms can be succinctly stated with a coolish, understated reflected light.

I often delight in a heavier, greenish, singular brush stroke down the lateral side of the masseter (the large, flat chewing muscle) that defines the jowl. It is a Baroque device that I picked up from Rubens. I was sorely tempted to apply it here, but thought the better of it.

Yes, painting is about choices. Good decisions and bad decisions.

A common bad decision is to illustrate the eye. The eye is best expressed with a succinct economy of means. The fewer brushstrokes the better. I tend to spend much more time with the nose than the eyes. Once the gaze is fixed, the eyes are dispatched in only a minute or two. It is the mouth that gives me kittens.

A good rule to adopt is to always render the features subservient to the overall structure of the head. The idea is ... the whole is greater than the sum of its features.
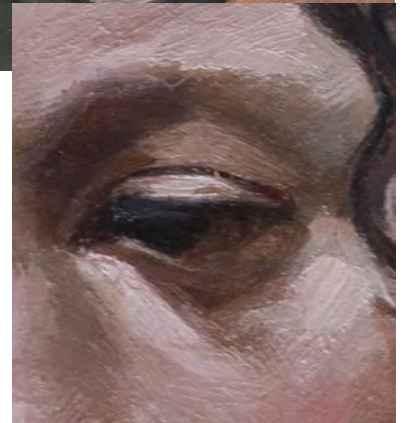
The formal painting elements fixed I go to town with my paint handling.

It is through autobiographical mark making and the abstract structural surface of paint as paint—don't force it into begin something that is is not—that the artist's expression flourishes.

My medium is now stand oil with a small measure of turpentine and a singular drop of egg yolk which is a siccative and paint stablilizer.

Oil paint dries by oxidization (outside in). The egg yolk hastens the drying of the oil paint's interiority. And it lends a nice sheen.

Good painting comprises four elements: precision of language, freedom of narrative, respect and love.

Painting is a language that demands precision of intent. Consider each brush stroke as a noun. Emerson called nouns the "speaking language of things". Your diction, your voice, is constructed brush stroke by brush stroke. It is not enough to merely describe or render something. For a narrative to engage the viewer it must have meaning beyond a time-worn trope.

Just as a writer's diction is built upon syntax and grammar, the painter's expression is built upon an underlying structural geometry (in Gérôme's and Manet's case: dynamic symmetry) and an overlaying recursive fractality of painterly lyricism. Each brush stroke is built upon the other to form a compelling story.

It goes without saying that you need to respect your subject. And respect your art. It is what gives your life meaning. And love.

*A*lla Prima

My touchstone for alla prima, or première coupe (first strike), is Frans Hals *Laughing Boy*, 1625. Four hundred years old and still as fresh as hot biscuits and gravy served up for Christmas din-din. Along with a copious amount of whiskey to carry me through this dismal soul dampening season of Holiday misery.

It is a small tondo tronie, a character study. A sliver under 12" diameter. A wholly engaging narrative whipped up by a master at the top of his game.

Having imbibed a whiskey too many I'll be frank: Painting alla prima is beyond the reach of the illustrative painter. Alla prima is a celebration of paint. It requires seeing through the eyes of a sculptor and carving facial form with a succinct economy of means.

There are no secrets in alla prima. Nowhere to hide. Either the painting works or it crashes. More often than not it crashes. And that's okay. If you can pull off one good alla prima out of twenty you're doing exceedingly well.

Whether an hour or seven the alla prima is done in a single session. Your primary agenda is first striking the big shape. For the well-trained painter that takes a little less than fifteen seconds. Time is precious. Strategy is everything!

When painting from life I spend the first twenty, thirty minutes mixing up my colors. It takes that long for a model to settle into pose. Almost every time the pose will change from the first to the second segment. It's better to spend that time mixing your colors. Those won't change much.

If you rush right in you'll be obliged to spend precious time wiping out, scraping down and correcting.

I like to feel the model out before committing the canvas. Once the arabesque, that critical big shape, is struck I'll quickly scrumble in the large dark pattern. I squint my eyes. That simplifies the elements into one big light and dark.

With the armature of shape and pattern fixed I serve up the half-tones in the abstract in a mosaic of thinly painted constructive shapes. This is the rehearsal—getting to know the lay of the land before charging at the windmill of great art.

At this juncture the model is scheduled for her second break. The pose is established. Before scampering down to the second floor cafeteria for a sugary snack and a hit of caffeine invert your painting. That abstracts the facial elements and reveals itself to a fresh set of eyes.

Well charged with caffeine, a regretful sugary donut and a melancholic disposition I attack the canvas like a cuckolded lover. Use a large brush. I prefer filberts. Small brushes are for small artists. Go big!

Every brush stroke is considered and rendered with a sympathetic concordance to the underyling anatomical form. What this means is that I am carving out the facial form. And like a sculptor working in clay I use my knife and fingers to push and pull the paint into place. The lights are painted thickly. The highlights as codas. Place them and leave 'em alone. The more you fidget, the more you lose.

Most important of all, the features are only suggested. Minimally. You might even find that ignoring the features renders a better painting.

Not only does your alla prima painting depend upon the structure of the head but also contrast: light/dark, cool/warm, color complementaries and simultaneous contrast, big/small shapes, thick/thin paint, pattern, rhythm and texture.

In this 32-minute vertical HD video I present the entire process of painting alla prima. There is no voice-over, although it is captioned where necessary.

The soundtrack is Beethoven. A pleasant reprise from the constant onslaught of jingle bell treacle.

This is a download video that you keep, share and refer to in the future. Download it first for best playback.

And on a concluding note:

My next **Painting the Alla Prima Portrait from Photographs** Zoom Workshop is Saturday/Sunday, December 28 and 29.

Start time: 18:30 - 21:00 PST both days
$160

For more information and to register, write me at michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com

alla prima!

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