





PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the February 2025 issue:

-  The Story of Babbe: the abstract structural surface
-  The Theory & Practice of Mixing Tones—a video tutorial

A Word ...

The second most important element, technique-wise, is not discussed enough. Unity is, hands-down, the most important. And the second is the abstract structural surface of your painting. That is your syntax, your diction through which your story/narrative is told. Imagine Huck-leberry Finn espousing upon the dark mysteries of the Mississippi in Elizabethan English. It very likely would contribute ill for the work. Your paint handling is the same.

Also in the February 2025 issue is a 32-minute HD video on both the theory and practice of mixing realist flesh tones.



Michael Britton
February 2025

Painting Lady Agnew of Lochnaw

You'll be following John Singer Sargent's painting process beginning with striking the arabesque, blocking-in and serving up the initial half-tones in the abstract.

From there you will proceed with spotting and tiling the color/value notes and planar forms learning to see through the eyes of a sculptor. Working general to specific the portrait emerges.

My upcoming, four session, **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, March 25 @ 18:30 PST and continues to April 15th.

In addition to the Zoom recording the workshop is filmed in ultra-resolution video and is your's to keep.

Write me at michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com for the syllabus and supply list and to register.



The abstract structural surface of painting

The Story of Babbe

Painters have stories to tell—that is why we paint. The better our craft, the more convincing our stories, our narratives, become.

It is the command of our craft and expression that sells the story. Ideally, craft takes a backseat to expression and the story. Craft works best when it is fluid and unabtrusive. It should look effortless. As natural as breathing—painting made easy.

Of course, it never is. The painter's alchemy is hard won. And sometimes, sometimes it all comes together effortlessly. Those are the days we paint for.

Usually it is a struggle. For beginners the struggle is striking shape. For intermediate painters it is color and form. For the advanced painter it is language and the construction of one's voice.

Step-by-step we acquire our skills. Sure, there are a million shortcuts—the secrets of the masters, wondrous mediums and concoctions, drawing devices and projectors—but they all conclude at the same dismal destination.

Painting bares all. Integrity is immediately felt. Disingenous intent is readily dismissed.



Michael Britton, *Babbe*, Oil on Panel,
20x30 cm, 2025

There is a hierarchy to painting: first and foremost is **Unity**. Everything must come together into a unified whole—it is the marriage of craft and expression.

Second is **Shape**. The shape of your canvas, whether it be dynamic or octavol, must have a supportive correspondence to your narrative, your story. And what the heck, I'll say this again: the universally popular 16X20" canvas is neither dynamic nor octavol. It is static. Dead on arrival.

Instead, select an 11x14" or 14x18" canvas. Those are dynamic shapes. More specifically, their proportions are 1.272 which is the square root ($\sqrt{\Phi}$) of the golden section.

Within the shape of your canvas is struck the **BIG** shape of your story. In this case a portrait. More specifically a *tronie*, a character study.



I forego the preliminary drawing. I find it too constraining and too demanding of fidelity. Worse, a preliminary drawing often leads to painting by coloring-in. Which is a less rigorous, timid and illustrative approach. If you can draw with a pencil or charcoal you can draw with a loaded brush. It's simply a matter of learning how to strike shape: how wide, how tall, and what are the angles.

Even for a small, 11x14" canvas, I strike and block-in the **BIG** shape with an extra-long handled (60cm) Escoda Classico #20 filbert. This brush takes some getting used to but its great advantage is the distance it allows you from your canvas. You can better adjudge shape from a distance. An added benefit is that you cannot be precious and timid with this brush. Much of a painting's appeal is its energy.

Of course there will always be drawing errors. Once struck—never, ever pre-measure! I verify my proportions and correct whatever miscreants are lounging about with a wooden stylus and a lightly-mediumed clean brush using it like a kneaded eraser.

The *ébauche* is the initial 'dead coloring-in'. As per John Singer Sargent's advice I paint seeing through the eyes of a sculptor.

My starting palette is limited to four colors: flake white, yellow ochre, indian red and black from which I prepare three half-tones: a light, a middle light and a dark light. It is well-advised to mix these initial half-tones a little darker and warmer than what the final intent will be.



These half-tones are served up in the abstract. Again, Sargent's dictum. That means to look past the facial features and into the building blocks of facial form.

Use a reasonably large brush and paint generally but accurately plotting in the basic color value notes as if they were colored pieces of clay. This is painting with a sculptural sensibility. I often use both brush and palette knife to simultaneously carve and construct facial form.

Often I add calcium carbonate to my half-tones. This serves several purposes: it is a paint extender, it thickens up the paint to a clay-like viscosity, and it hastens the drying process. As a rule of thumb your lights should be painted thickly and your darks thinly.

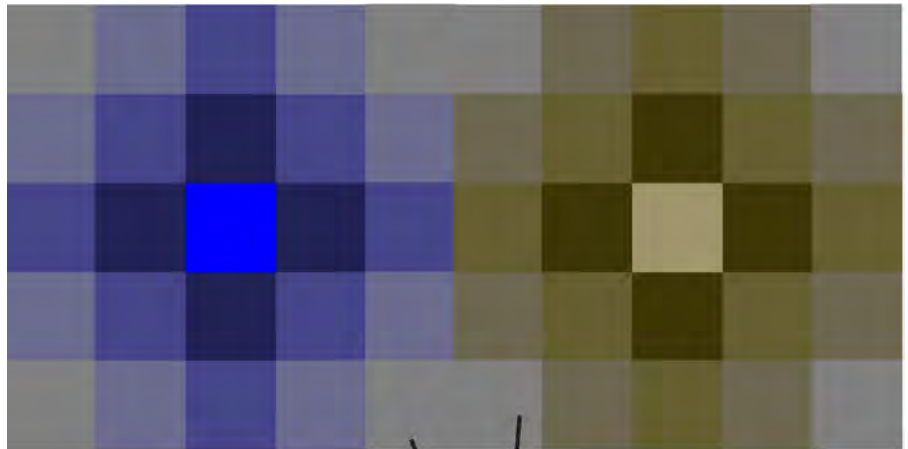
An important consideration at this early stage is the figure/ground relationship. The ground is the background. I usually have no idea of what to do with the ground at this stage, but something has to be done if for nothing else than to appease color's interactivity. Namely simultaneous contrast: color affects its neighbor. Green applied next to, say, yellow, will push said yellow toward red.

And, of course, there is push-back on yellow's part. It will push red toward violet.

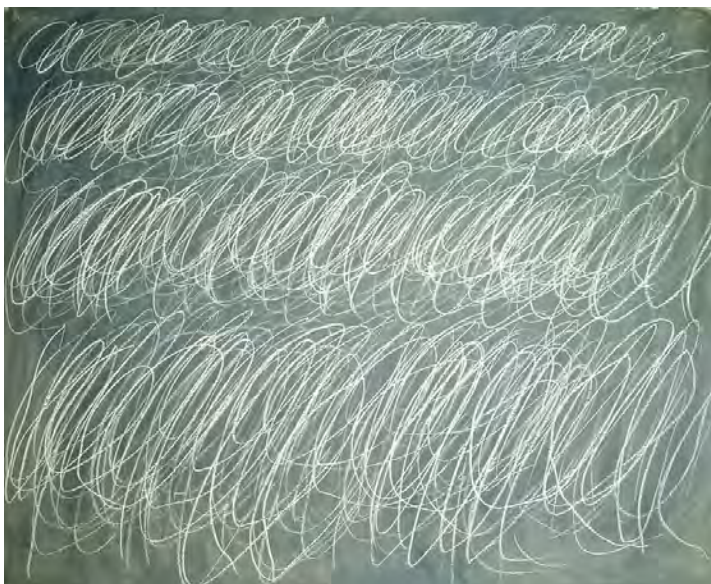
Red/Green and Yellow/Violet are complementaries.

Simultaneous contrast is a powerful tool. It can pump up the color vibrancy of your painting, but it comes with a dark side—used poorly and it will turn your color to mud.

The ground plays an important, supportive role in the painting's story. It should never be an afterthought. I often find the ground a more difficult proposition than the figure. A good grounding in art history often times will proffer ideas. At least something to begin with.



Note the simultaneous contrast effect of these two grays. They are exactly the same 50% B & W!



Cy Twombly, *Untitled [Rome]*, 1970

Contemplating what to do with Babbe I thought of the American painter Cy Twombly's 'chalkboard' paintings. There is a manic/anxious quality to them that well suits Babbe. And the painting, I think.

We'll see how that goes. Creative process is an additive/subtractive endeavor. Meaning in painting is derived from the layers of paint. Which brings us to the focus of my dialectic: the abstract structural surface.

Portrait painting is an extraordinarily rich language. There is no 'right' way to paint. As far as I'm concerned if the painting is beautiful—and beauty often possesses an unsettling reality—then it is right.

A painting can adhere to all of the technical precepts, painted 'right', and the result can be ugly, staid and timid.

In my wasteful youth I would dutifully prepare a preliminary drawing and proceed with coloring it in the correct, prescribed academic manner. Sure, my copy of Ruben's Clara Serena is pretty. But it lacks the energy of the original. Mine is nothing more than a slavish, technical exercise.



Lucien Freud, *Reflection (Self-Portrait)*, 1985

It is much easier to be a technician than an artist. A technician strives for ever more perfection (whatever that is). The artist struggles with an anguished ambiguity toggling between technique and expression.

There is nothing new under the sun. At some point every artist will revolt against their maestro. Cult leaders are often assassinated by their most ardent devotees. That said, the beginning artist is faced with a heavy burden: choose the wrong maestro (teacher) and your career will get off to a bad start. Unfortunately, often irreparably.

You have to follow your gut instinct and not your wallet. It also depends on what you want to achieve as an artist.

A tattoo artist needs high, illustrative skills. A fine artist pretty much needs the entire package: craft, spirit and construct.

The British painter, Lucien Freud (1922-2011) is a good example of how one's expressive voice is developed, sounded, from another's.



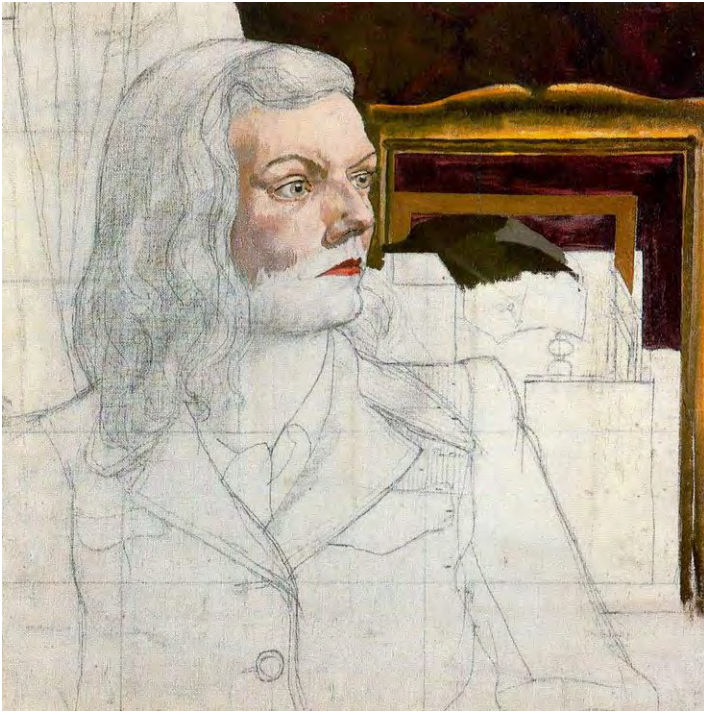
Stanley Spencer, *Portrait of Hilda, Unity and Dolls*, 1937



Lucien Freud, *Girl in a Green Dress*, 1954

The British painter, Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) had a profound influence on Freud. I can find nothing in the literature that suggests that the younger Freud ever met Spencer. Freud was considered eccentric, even by British standards; Spencer was in another orbit altogether.

No one comes out of nowhere. Expressive voice, the self, is built upon accumulated layers of influences and experiences.



Freud's painting start (on the right) was similar to Spencer's. It is a process of spotting color/value notes, building each note upon another. The American painter, Edwin Dickenson, taught this method of painting in New York City for much of his career.

In terms of painting process it's not my cuppa tea, but I don't readily dismiss it either. I incorporate the elements of spotting color/value notes in my work.

For beginning artists, first acquire your foundation skills, i.e., accurately striking shape, assessing proportions, value structure and color.

And explore the manifold possibilities of painting. Don't settle and stick with one method. Be an artist, a voyager, not merely an acolyte.

Painting is an ever evolving language. Take what you need, go with it and make it your own.

I paint like a sculptor simultaneously building up and carving form with a concordant sensibility to the underlying form.

I treat my paint as if it were colored clay. Calcium carbonate allows me to mix up thick, cookie-dough-like colors which I plonk on with the brush and push and pull it with my palette knife and even my fingers. On many an occasion I'll use my brush handle to knit edges together.

'Blending' is a destructive practice, it destroys color value. It is the purview of the inexperienced.

Not only am I concerned with facial form but also the interplay of cool/warm tones. Cadmium green light and burnt sienna produces a beautiful, cool dark light which can be tempered further with vermilion. Sometimes shaded with a trace of black.



Paint fearlessly. —damn the torpedoes!— If things go sideways you can always scrape down the canvas. Of course, no one likes to scrape down. It usually requires a stiff drink, an extra strong cuppa green tea to screw up the resolve to tear down your darling. 'Kill your darlings' was oft the battle cry of Sargent, Velàzquez, Rembrandt. Perhaps not exactly those words, but Sargent wouldn't hesitate for a moment to scrape down a painting.

In my darkest hours, when a painting goes bad, when it fails to thrive, I remind myself of the auteur Robert Altman's quote: Only mediocrities consistently work at their best.

If you feel compelled to scrape down, it is often for the best. You cannot scrape it all off, a vestige of the battle will remain from which you can rise again like a paint smeared phoenix.

Painting with a sculptural sensibility is an additive/subtractive process. Paint is pushed and molded to express facial form.

It is also an asymptotic process, always working toward greater accuracy. Constantly refining the drawing. Drawing errors cruelly manifest as the painting progresses.

I find that painting with love, being entranced and beguiled by the myriad beauty of color, is a sure road to ruin. You need to constantly step back from your work and assess it with a gimlet eye.

At regular intervals I invert the painting, examining it with a harshness that would chill the stoutest and blackest heart. Often, too, I will paint upside down. Anything, anything that would give me a fresh set of eyes.



Babbe is an older woman, the merciless vicissitudes of life's lashings have left their mark. No one escapes unharmed. We're all damaged in one way or another. Babbe is a survivor.

The abstract structural surface that is your paint handling, texture and autographic mark-making should be concordant with your subject, it also defines your expression and voice. Painting diction defines character. Color, composition, drawing, etc. play their supportive roles but at the end of the painting day it is the surface treatment fused into a unified whole that engages the viewer.

a **NEW** ultra-2K video workshop
from Michael Britton

Painting Alla Prima Portraits from Photographs

Don't just copy the photograph ... make it your own!

Just released this 3½ hours, ultra-2K video takes you step-by-step through the process and strategy of translating the photograph into an alla prima oil painting that is as fresh as mama's hot biscuits at Sunday dinner!

Alla prima, also known as premiere coup, is a first strike—a painting resolved in a single sitting.

But I'm not hide-bound by rules. There is good practice and there are beautiful, compelling paintings. The twain doesn't always meet.

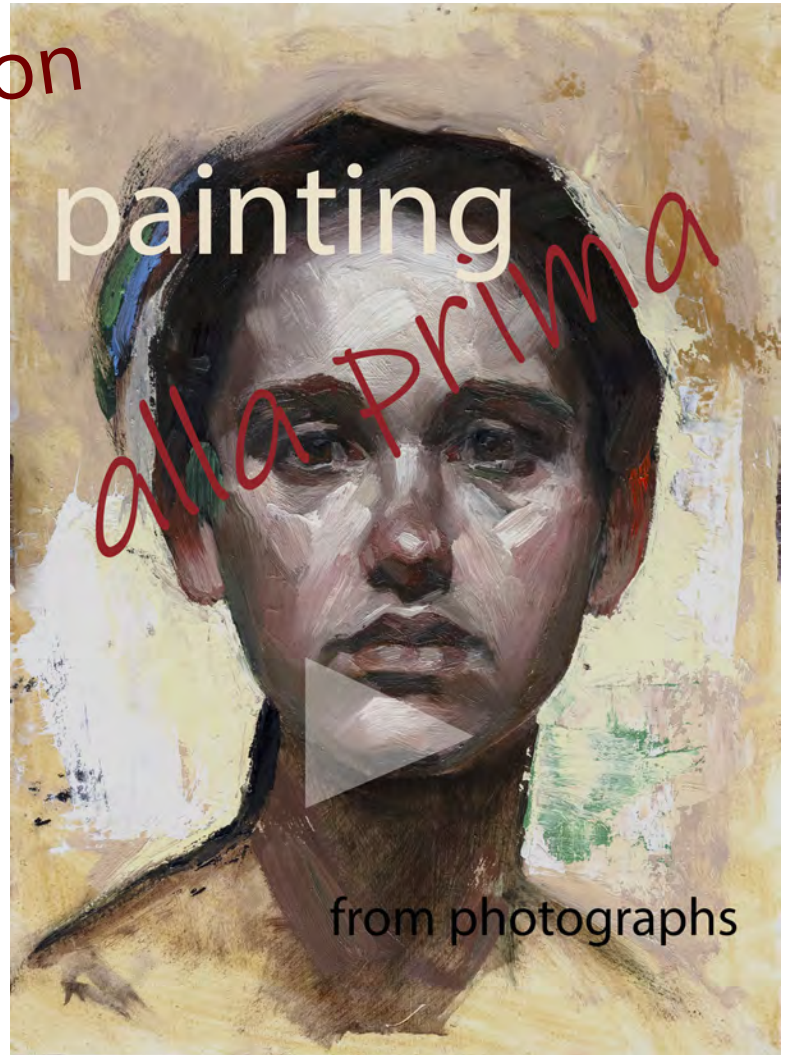
That said, alla prima requires both a sound foundation and working strategy.

You begin with striking the big shape, followed by blocking-in and serving up the initial half-tones in the abstract. Just like John Singer Sargent taught.

And then you're out the gate! Mixing flesh color and building up the paint surface (the abstract structural surface) with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form until an engaging, 3-dimensional alla prima portrait is achieved.

View the trailer, it's less than two minutes, and see why I get so excited about painting alla prima!

And here's another reason to get excited ... take advantage of my **NEW release offer of only \$37**. But only until midnight, February 20th. Thereafter it's \$77. Use your \$40 savings for new brushes.



SPECIAL OFFER!
ONLY \$37

The practice of mixing flesh tones

Of all the painter's tools, the palette is the most personal and readily given over to our idiosyncrasies. But there are universal guidelines for best practices. Foremost, abandon the white palette immediately. It is nigh impossible to mix accurate color on a white palette. And don't even get me started on those abysmal paper palettes.



Edgar Degas' palette

A wood palette will last for years, if not decades. Or until the airline irrevocably loses your luggage and reimburses you with a food coupon.



Delacroix's palette

A wood palette needs to be seasoned before using. I season mine the old fashioned way by pouring and rubbing in a copious serving of raw linseed oil (it needn't be artist quality, hardware shops often carry it) on both sides. Let it soak in overnight and repeat three or four times until your palette is saturated. It will now have some heft to it.

At the end of each painting session, scrape off the remainder of your color mixes (or put your palette in the freezer for the next day's painting—basically, just deny it oxygen) and with a rag rub in the left-overs. Soon your palette will have a silky, neutral gray patina that is a true joy to work on.

Beyond that the palette game giddily traipses into the woolly wilds. There is no one size fits all. Degas' palette is reasonably basic, Delacroix's palette is a complicated arrangement of then-scientific principles. Well-suited for Delacroix; a disaster in waiting for anyone else.

The palette employed in many academies utilize tinted strings of color. It is a palette influenced by the 18th century English painter, Thomas Bardwell's *A Practical Treatise on Painting in Oil Colours*



Many academically trained artists prefer this palette. ... there are many roads to Rome.

My objection is the parsimonious servings of color. Like Sargent I prefer ample portions of mixed color. Not only for the construction of my abstract structural surface but also, 'cause sooner or later, when not if, you'll find yourself caught short of an essential value/tone.

The tinted ivory black string proves useful for beginners. Black is excellent for cutting the intensity of yellows but only in trace amounts.

You can [download a PDF of Bardwell's book here](#). It's copyright is fair use. You may glean a few pearls from it, but bear in mind it is written for 18th century painters.

Practical treatise
on painting in oil-
colours.

Thomas Bardwell



And now for the main event: in this 32 minute, downloadable HD video, I present my practice of mixing flesh tones for the first pass of the pentimento. It is a trifle dense and likely needs to be viewed a few times to coalesce the practical and the theory. It proffers a rationale of mixing color values.



William Merritt Chase's *Woman in a Black Hat*

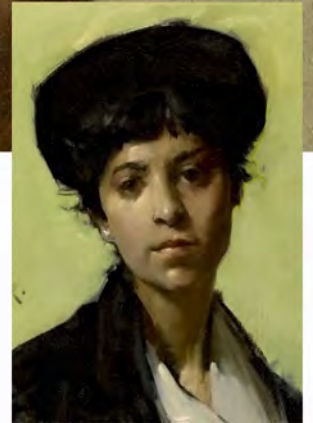
A video workshop by Michael Britton

An ultra-HD video workshop from Michael Britton featuring William Merritt Chase's *Woman in a Black Hat*.

It is through copying master paintings that you learn the language of painting and develop a deeper, more profound expressive voice.

- ◆ Learn how to strike, analyse, and correct the BIG shape. This is the critical skill that establishes the likeness, gesture and composition.
- ◆ Learn how to mix realist flesh tones with fundamental color theory.
- ◆ Learn how to render 3-dimensional facial form with dynamic, expressive brush work.
- ◆ Above all—acquire the solid fundamentals of portrait painting as you proceed step-by-step through each passage of the painting's development.
- ◆ This is not another dumbed-down-painting-made-easy workshop. It is presented at a college level for the serious painter.

In this ultra-HD 11½ hours download you clearly see every brush stroke as I explain its rationale from striking the BIG shape



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ONLY \$197