





PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the January 2025 issue:

 Verna: Drawing into Painting

 Painting Alla Prima—Redux!

A Word ...

Another year awakens and we have promises to keep. For me the year begins with sharpening my striking skills. When a painting fails to thrive the culprit can often be attributed to not quite getting the BIG shape right. That is the locus of a painting and if that center cannot hold ... well, it all goes to ruin.

The January 2025 issue of **PORTRAIT PAINTER** kicks off with *Verna*, a drawing that I disinterred from the dusty tomb that is my filing cabinet and worked into a painting.

For me the setting of a year is both a time of sombre reflection and renewed ambition to paint. As one painting sets and is put to rest, sometimes mournfully, another rises.



Michael Britton
January 2025

Portrait painting and the interplay of cool & warm flesh tones

John Singer Sargent famously proclaimed that Antonio Mancini (1853-1930), was the greatest living artist. Mancini's fluttering interplay of cool and warm flesh tones had a profound influence on Sargent.

My upcoming, four session, **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, January 21 @ 18:30 PST and continues to February 11th.

You'll be studying Mancini's engaging portrait of Carmignella, 1870.

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.



Drawing into Painting

The Layer Cake of Painting

Perhaps the most damning praise one can receive as an artist is 'Gee, it looks just like a photograph.'

Bill Bryson puts it well: I would rather have bowel surgery in the woods. With a stick. Rather than receive that faint praise.

Yet far, far too many beginning artists strive to emulate a photograph. First, the language of photography is distinct from that of painting. Despite the protestations and manipulations of photographers, photography remains a machine language.

Painting is a highly evolved human language. And as the storm clouds of artificial intelligence gather the battle lines between machine and human language will both harden and fuse. We're in for some interesting times.

And fatigue is already settling in.

I have a tendency, one could say an attraction, to charging at windmills. Less I digress and lead you merrily down the garden path ... let's move on.

Painting is a complex, evolved language. It is language that defines us. Good painting is much, much more than merely mimetically rendering an image to tell a story. According to Plato in *Republic* mimesis is a visual image related to imitation, re-presentation. And woe to poetry, Socrates considered it a second-hand imitation of an already second-hand imitation. Oh well, nothing is written in stone. Everything evolves. That is why we make art.



Michael Britton, *Verna*, Conté on paper, 2004

A long, long time ago, in the mists of evaporated memory, Verna was my muse. In ways she was an evocation of another artist's muse, Frederick Varley's *Vera*, 1931.

An adolescent condemned to a suburban cultural wasteland I found solace and succor in Varley's portrait of Vera Weatherbie (1909-1977). Vera, too, was a painter. And Varley's lover for a time. Vera developed Alzheimer's in her 50's and was lobotomized in 1967. She died choking on a piece of steak.

It chills one to the bone to think how much our adolescence informs the directions and pathways of our life's remainder.

Vera's seeming simplicity belies the underlying architectural structure. Simple, in and of itself, is meaningless. A simplicity distilled through a wall of complexity tenders deep meaning and narrative engagement. There is a reason *Vera* has become an icon. Even featured on a Canadian postage stamp. Good painting attaches itself to a nation's psyche and identity. And, yes, good painting can forgive a scandalous, torrid love affair between a young woman and a man, 28 years her senior.

This wall of complexity is the layer cake of painting. Perhaps not including the torrid love affair part.

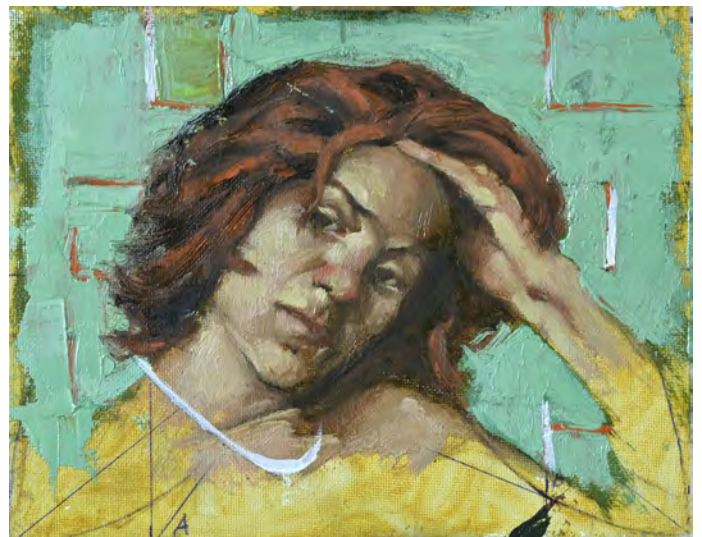
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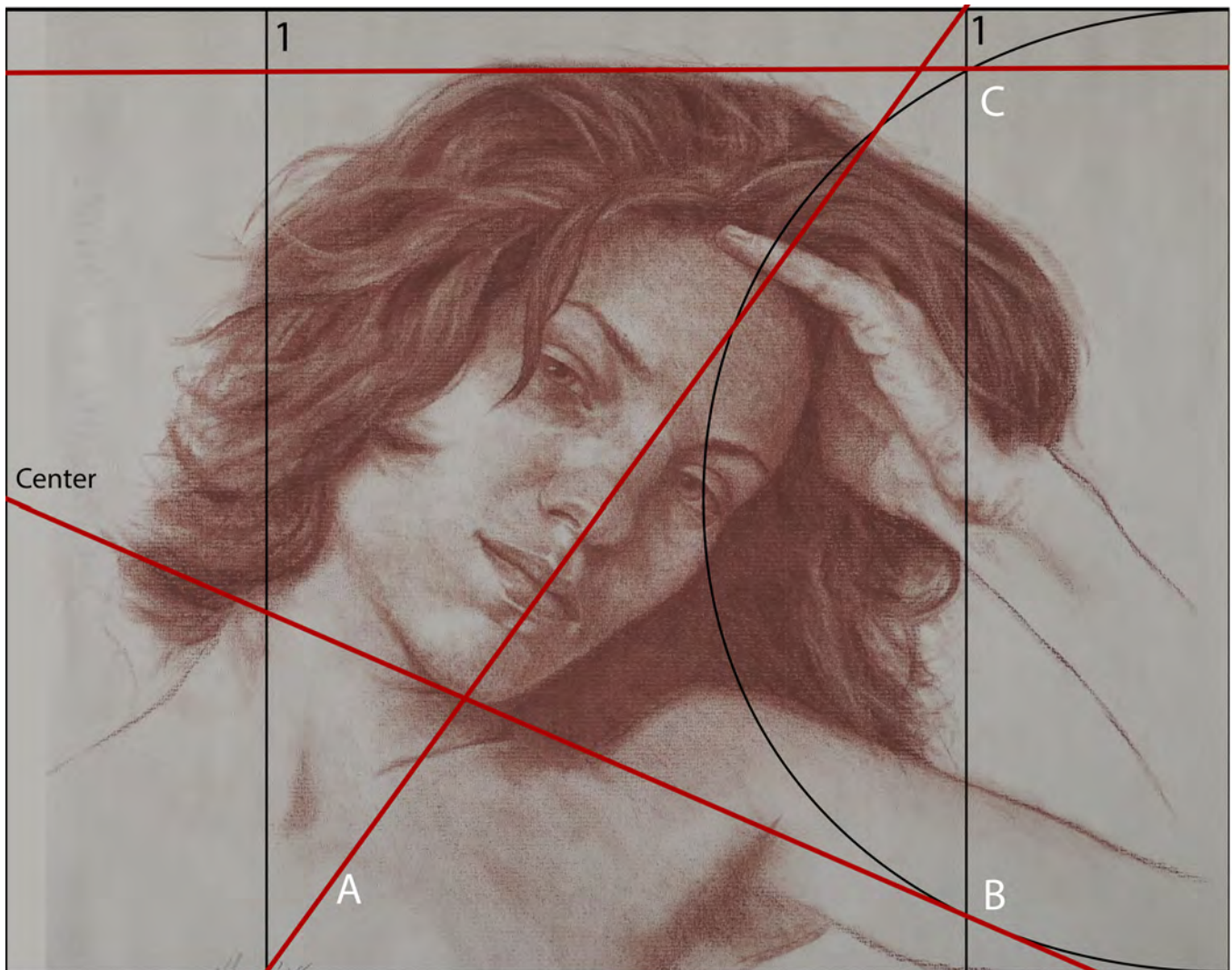
Almost twenty years passed between my conté drawing of Verna and the painting. Very likely a lugubrious nostalgia led me to disinter Verna from her dusty tomb.

A **pochade** is a small, thumbnail sketch wherein the idea is drafted toward the concept for a painting. My pochade for *Verna* is small, 5½ X 7". It is a $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle. The square root of the golden number 1.618.



Frederick H. Varley, *Vera*, Oil on Canvas, 1931





The first decision to be made is the canvas. Canvas refers to the shape of the support whether it is a stretched linen or canvas upon stretcher bars or a panel. I prefer oak panels. They're ideal for storage but are limited to size. 18" is the maximum width or length for panels. Larger than that they require cradling. ... don't ask. The effort and resulting weight significantly diminishes all of the benefits of the panel.

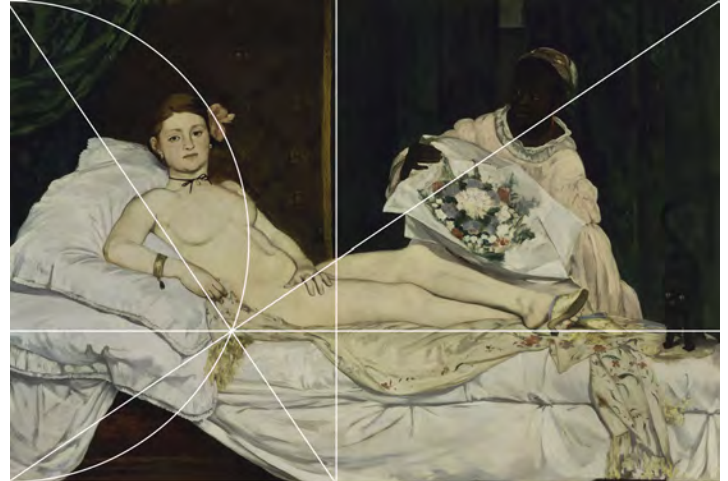
In my classes I recommend an 11 x 14" panel or canvas. This readily available size is a $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle; an excellent introduction to dynamic symmetry and well-suited for portraiture and head studies.

I have serious reservations about the universally popular 16 x 20" canvas. It is a static shape. It's lifelessness dooms your painting from the start.

The chassis, the load-bearing frame that make a painting work, is the underlying geometry, the harmonious divisions of space, that partition the canvas. It is at this point that most beginners' eyes glaze over.

Frankly, this is where the serious artist parts ways with the dilettante. There is no sugar coating this. The underlying geometry provides a direct conduit into the viewer's unconscious mind. Whether they like it, or not, they are engaged. Sometimes enraged. As Manet experienced.

For *Verna* I used the same tools as Manet did for *Olympia*. Whereas Manet's locus is the **Reciprocal** (established near the center of the base—the reciprocal mirrors the canvas), I used the **Rabatelements** (the overlapping squares, demarcated with '1', within the canvas) to place Verna's facial angle.



Eduard Manet, *Olympia*, 1883

The geometry requires **PLAY**. More often than not, it is a constructive/deconstructive process. If the solution feels beautiful, it probably is. The rule of simplifying through a wall of complexity fully applies.



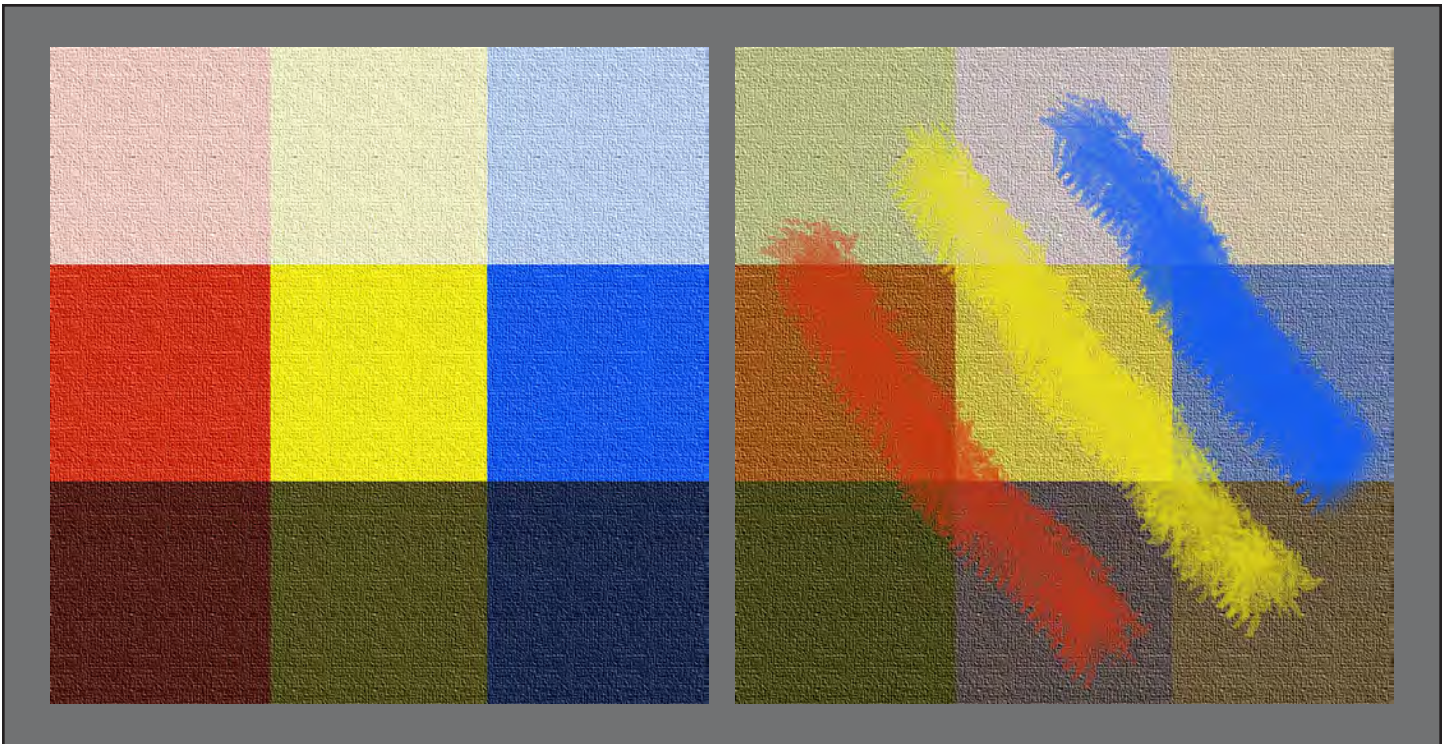
Your next consideration is the **Notan**, a Japanese term meaning black/white harmony.

It is the Notan that sticks the painting to the wall.

Patterning is an important element of the Notan. Painting is built upon contrasts.

There is light/dark contrast and contrast of large/small shapes arranged dynamically within the canvas.

Your arrangement of light/dark patterning should express movement, velocity and rhythm. Verna has a clockwise movement initiated by the facial angle, swept down the forearm and whipped upward by her necklace. A counter-clockwise movement is in *sinisterium*.



Color is the prime material of painting. There are only two basic color harmonies: the primary harmonic triad—red, yellow, blue; and the secondary harmonic triad—green, violet, orange. However, these two basic packages require unpacking.

Color forms comprise tint, tone and shade.

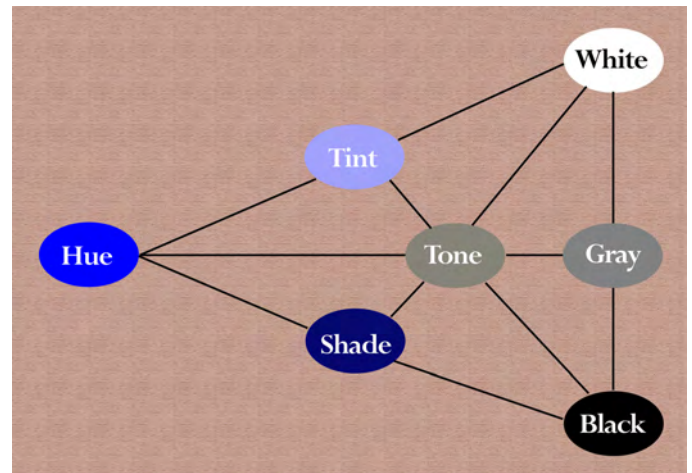
Tint is adding white to a color (hue).

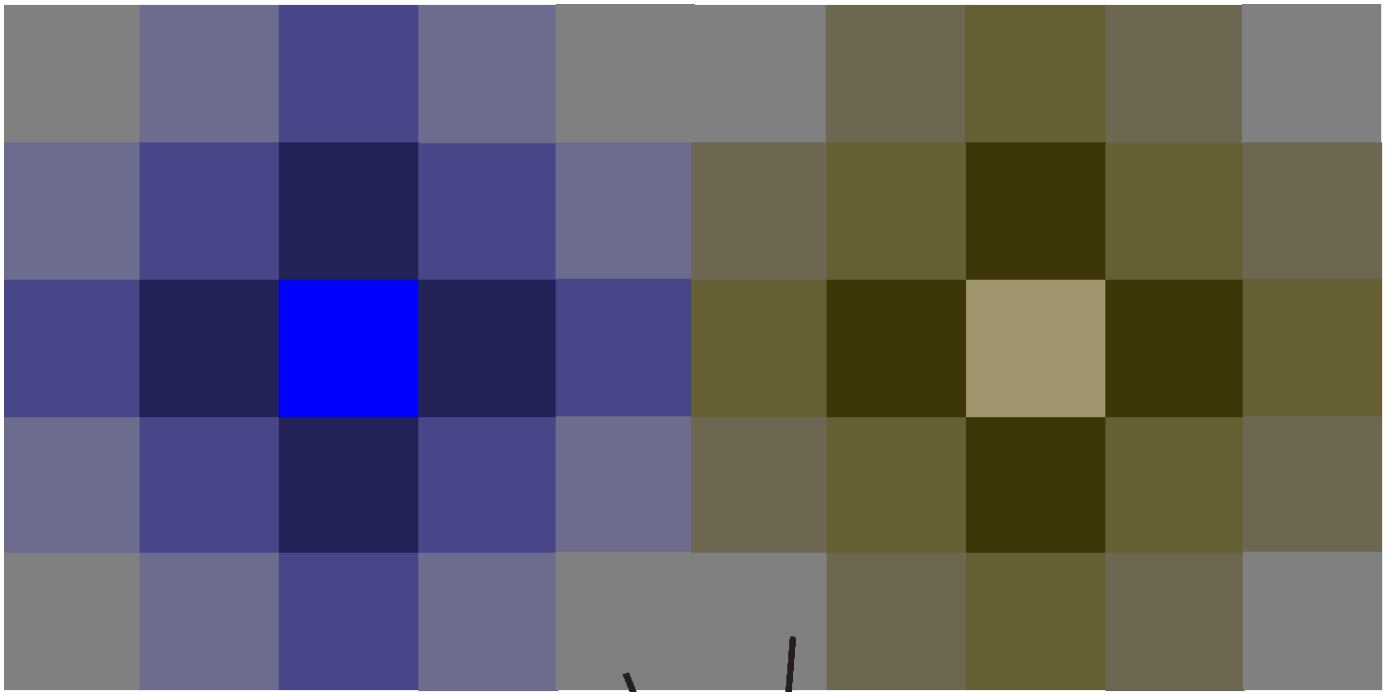
Tone is degrading a hue with its complement. (i.e., red/green)

Shade is adding black.

The top-left color squares is the primary harmonic triad (red, yellow, blue) where the top row is tinted, the bottom row shaded. It's expression is clean and direct.

The top-right color squares is also the primary harmonic triad whose hues have been glazed with their complements. Green glazed over red; violet over yellow; and orange over blue. The expression is subdued. Even melancholic.

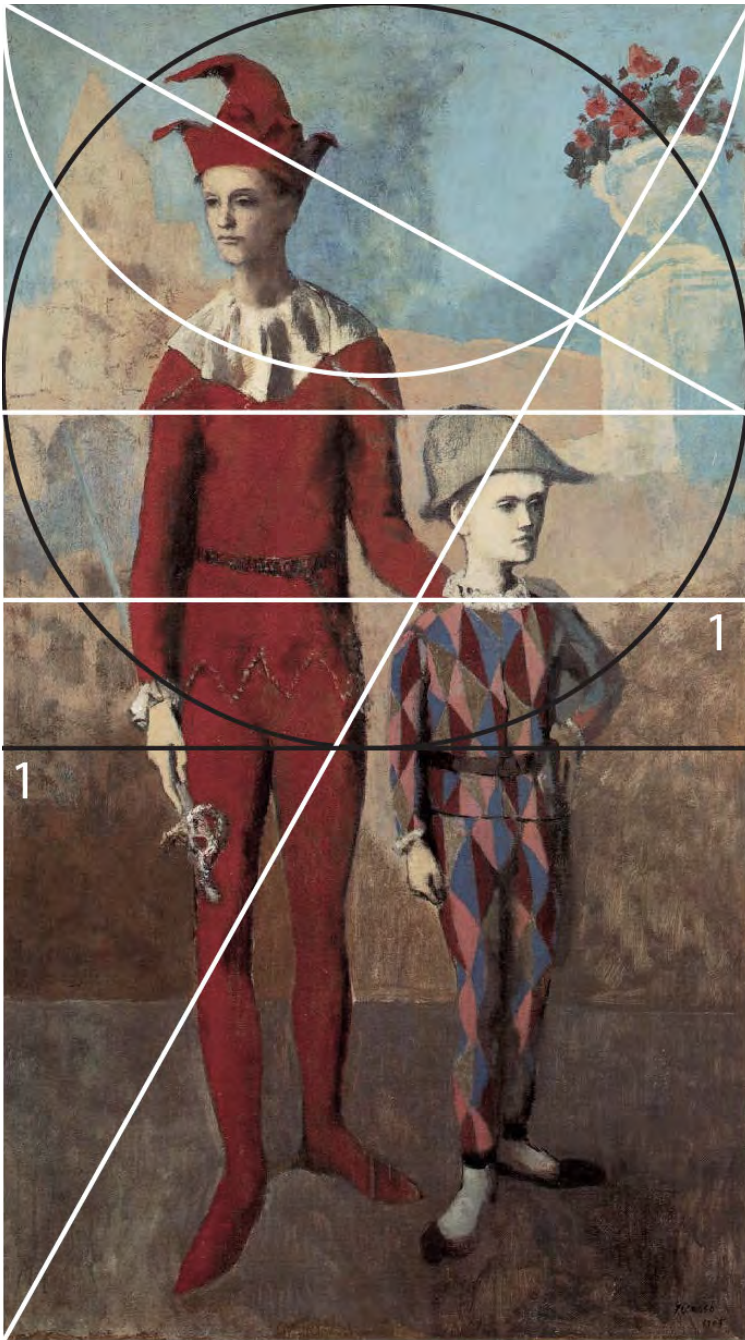




Note the simultaneous contrast effect of these two grays. They are exactly the same 50% B & W!

The Seven Contrasts of Color

1. Contrast of hue
2. Contrast of light/dark
3. Contrast of temperature (cool/warm)
4. Contrast of complementaries
5. Contrast of saturation: Illustrated above, Blue is sequentially degraded with black/white gray and is illumined. To a lesser extent is the Blue, on the right-side, that has been radically toned and tinted.
6. Simultaneous Contrast: Determines the aesthetic unity of color harmony. A hue will push it's neighbor toward its complement. When used wisely it enhances color. Simultaneous contrast when used unwisely collapses color into mud.
7. Contrast of Extension: A small area of a color engulfed in a significantly larger area of its complement will assert itself in the viewer's eye with an almost insect-like will to survive.



Pablo Picasso, *Acrobat and Young Harlequin*, 1905, 191.1 x 108.6 cm. Oil on canvas

Let's put all of this together.

Picasso's early work was informed by the classicist Nicolas Poussin and the realist Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot.

Take note of the figures' placement vis-a-vis the rabatements (indicated by '1')

The beauty of dynamic symmetry is that it is fractal. Concordance begets concordance.

The color scheme—the primary harmonic triad—adds to the powerful pull of this deceptively simple painting.

Permit me to say this again: simple, in and of itself is meaningless, however a simplicity arrived at through a wall of complexity ... well, it sends a tingle up my spine.

In these early years of Picasso's career he painted thinly. Perhaps it was due to the poverty he endured, paint was actually more expensive then. Perhaps it was a deliberate decision. Likely a combination of both.

Later, Picasso's paint surface was thicker, more exuberant. And this brings us to the next layer, the sculptural abstract structure of the paint's surface.

Texture is the icing on the painting's layer cake where expression comes into full play. Oil paint has a material weight that acrylic lacks. Adding an extender to your paint, such as calcium carbonate and a drop of egg yolk, significantly increases the sculptural possibilities of your narrative.



William Merritt Chase, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1900



Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Alice Kurtz*, Oil, 1903

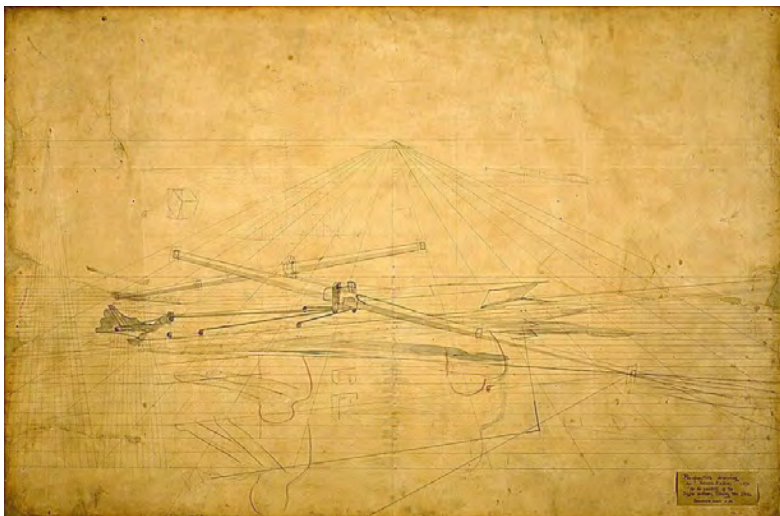
The two titans of 19th Century American painting, the Philadelphian Thomas Eakins and the New Yorker, William Merrick Chase illustrate the avenues of realist painting. Eakins, who studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme, was an illustrative painter. Chase, whose school of art became Parsons School of Design, strode the painter/sculptural road.



Thomas Eakins, *Study for John Biglin in a Single Scull*, Oil, 1874

At great risk of being forever banished—tared and feathered, entombed in a gunny sack and cavalierly tossed into the cargo hold of an outbound, and much delayed, Amtrak train—from the City of Brotherly Love, Eakins strength lay in complex illustrative narratives. His portraits, alas, are stiff and exhibit the joie d'vivre of cardboard.

Eakins would go to great preparatory lengths for his paintings. Interestingly, he would do highly rendered oil studies for his watercolor paintings.



Thomas Eakins, *John Biglin in a Single Scull*,
Watercolor 1874

As I was saying ... texture, the abstract structural surface, of painting plays a large expressive role. Texture also includes your brushwork which is both your autographic mark-making and is best rendered with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical structure of the head.

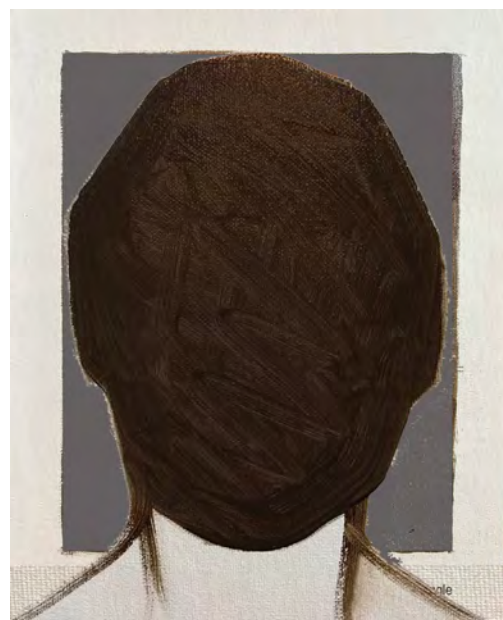
Of course, beginners have enough on their plate without having to deal with the issues of texture. A beginner's primary objective is to learn how to accurately and consistently strike shape. You begin with the square and rectangles: how wide, how tall.

The good news is you only need to recognize three rectangles in portrait drawing. The square, the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ and the truncated $\sqrt{2}$.

And since I am spooning up opinions—well informed but opinions nonetheless—like a tipsy boor in an Irish pub I will go so far as to say that in his narrative paintings Eakins surpassed his teacher, Gérôme, who was then the most famous painter in Europe, which was pretty much the whole world then.

Understandably, Eakins portrait career was a dismal failure. His taciturn personality didn't help endear him to prospective clients. Unlike the sparkling demeanor of William Chase or the elegant John Singer Sargent.

What I am attempting to say in this sombre polemic is that the illustrative road is ill-suited for the portrait. Of course, no sooner does this pronouncement slip out than the Wyeths come to mind. Suffice it to say that the exceptions prove the rule.





Thomas Eakins, *Study of a Girl's Head*, 1868



William M. Chase, *Portrait of a Woman* 1906

From this humble beginning you establish the angles that define the head within their respective dynamic rectangle. Everything builds upon this premise.

I teach this in my modular series of skill-building, [download tutorials](#).

There are many, many lessons to be learned by studying how master artists begin their paintings. It is in their beginnings that you can look under the hood and see how and what makes a painting work.

Thomas Eakins' *Study of a Girl's Head*, is illustrative—essentially a colored-in drawing. This is the process he learned studying under Gérôme. It lacks the oomph! of Chase's *Portrait of a Woman* who began his paintings by first striking the arabesque (the BIG shape) with a few succinct brush strokes before serving up the half-tones in the abstract. This was also the approach of John Singer Sargent.



John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of a Gentleman*.



William M. Chase, *Man with Bandana*, 1878



William M. Chase, *Portrait of Eilef Peterssen*, 1876 [Detail]

Chase's paint handling is downright, downhome, exuberant! He paints as if he is modeling the head in clay giving his portraits a tactile, space invasive dimension. He takes the lessons of Velàzquez and gives them a run for the money.

To carve out facial form requires stiff paint. An extender such as calcium carbonate is used to achieve the desired stiffness of paint and hold it so that it doesn't collapse in the drying process. Oil paint dries by oxidization, forming a skin and leaving the interior wet. Like a jelly donut.

Unlike jelly donuts this is not a good thing. An extender, plus a drop of egg yolk (which is a siccativ. More is not better!) stabilizes the paint rheologically—drying it from the inside out.

As for so-called secret mediums of the masters ... linseed, walnut or poppy oil. That's all Chase or Sargent used. Some artist's use black oil which is linseed oil cooked to almost boiling and 10% litharge (lead) stirred in. It's purpose is to hasten the drying process. Supposedly. I've not noticed any dramatic drying-time savings in my use of it. And then there is meglib wherein mastic is added to black oil. My advice: Don't.



Heeding the lessons of Chase and Sargent, and Velàzquez, too! I strike the arabesque with a few succinct lines to place Verna's head within the armature of my geometric matrix.

My palette is restricted to four colors: lead white, yellow ochre, venetian red and vine black. The imprimatura (the initial toning of the canvas) is yellow ochre tempered with a touch of black and applied with the gusto of an abstract expressionist holding a grudge. This electrifies the canvas, giving it a jolt of energy before I even begin.

I think it is poor practice to wholly cover the imprimatura. But that's just me.

I serve up the half-tones in the abstract. This means looking past the features and into the basic building blocks of facial form. The features will evolve mostly of their own accord.

This is the ébauche.



The last thing I wanted to do was another glib painting of a pretty face. I wanted *Verna* to have a bitter bite that expresses the bi-polar roller coaster that was Verna. She was at war with the world.

The artist's conundrum is how to express sentiment with paint and gesture alone. With minimal narrative props.

The abstract structural surface is the painter's diction. Words are supplanted with brush strokes. The brush strokes construct the facial forms with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical structure. And at a higher level of painting—the summit is always out-of-grasp—there are the elements of recursive fractal relationships that proffer a veil of poetic rhythm. And usually a trace of melancholy.

NEW RELEASE!

A new 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.

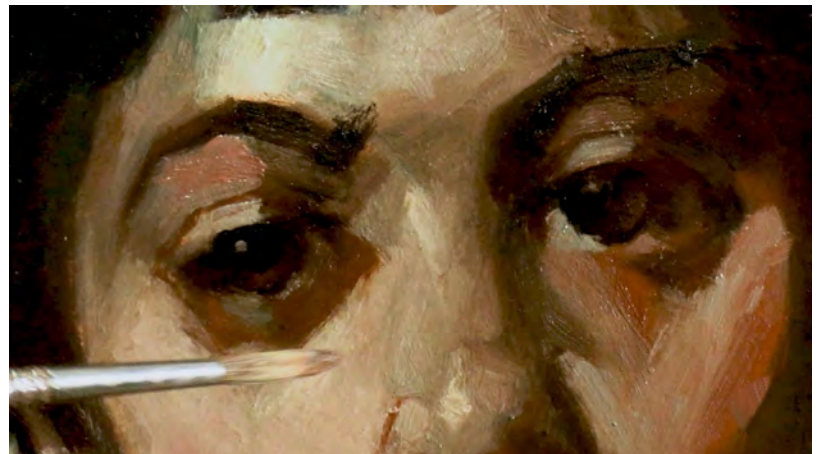
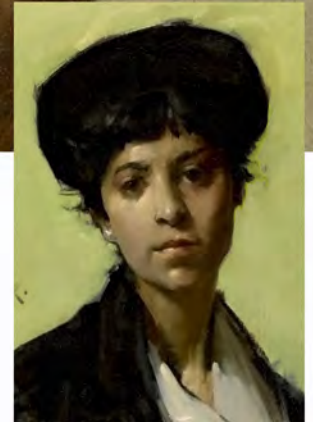
- ◆ Learn how to strike, analyse, and correct the BIG shape. This is the critical skill that establishes the likeness, gesture and composition.
- ◆ Learn how to mix realist flesh tones with fundamental color theory.
- ◆ Learn how to render 3-dimensional facial form with dynamic, expressive brush work.
- ◆ 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 to the concluding codas that snap the entire painting together.

Order now for
ONLY \$197



Portrait of a Woman
in a Black Hat, 1912



Sweat, Tears & Recriminations

The Joy of Alla Prima

Painting portraits alla prima is informal—it is casual—perhaps even a trifle *louche*.

It is a quick exchange—an impromptu dialogue laced with witticisms of the day's prosaic events expressed through the wondrous materiality of oil paint.

Alla prima is exuberant. It goes straight to the heart of the matter unabashedly stripping away all pretenses and lifting off the masks that we dutifully bear.

No other medium quite matches the depth and richness of an oil alla prima. At times, watercolor comes close; even the greatest masters rarely manage to pull off a good one.

Painting alla prima is a highwire act. It demands that you be at the top of your game. A few wobbly missteps are to be expected, they add to the tension and thrills the chattering crowd with a few brilliantly inspired codas of color.

Alas, many an alla prima will plunge to a paint-smear demise like a startled and witless Icarus. Nothing to do but scrape off the remains and summon another volunteer.



Michael Britton, *Josie*, Oil on panel, 30x22 cm, 2024

From the final days of 2024, my two-session alla prima workshop. Whether one spends 20 minutes or two days on an alla prima—I'm not hide-bound by rules, there is no right or wrong way. If it's beautiful it's right—is of little significance. What matters is that the painting be fresh and direct.

That is the game. Like a kite cut loose the successful alla prima portrait will soar.

But it is fragile. Leave it alone. A single preciously applied stroke can kill it.

