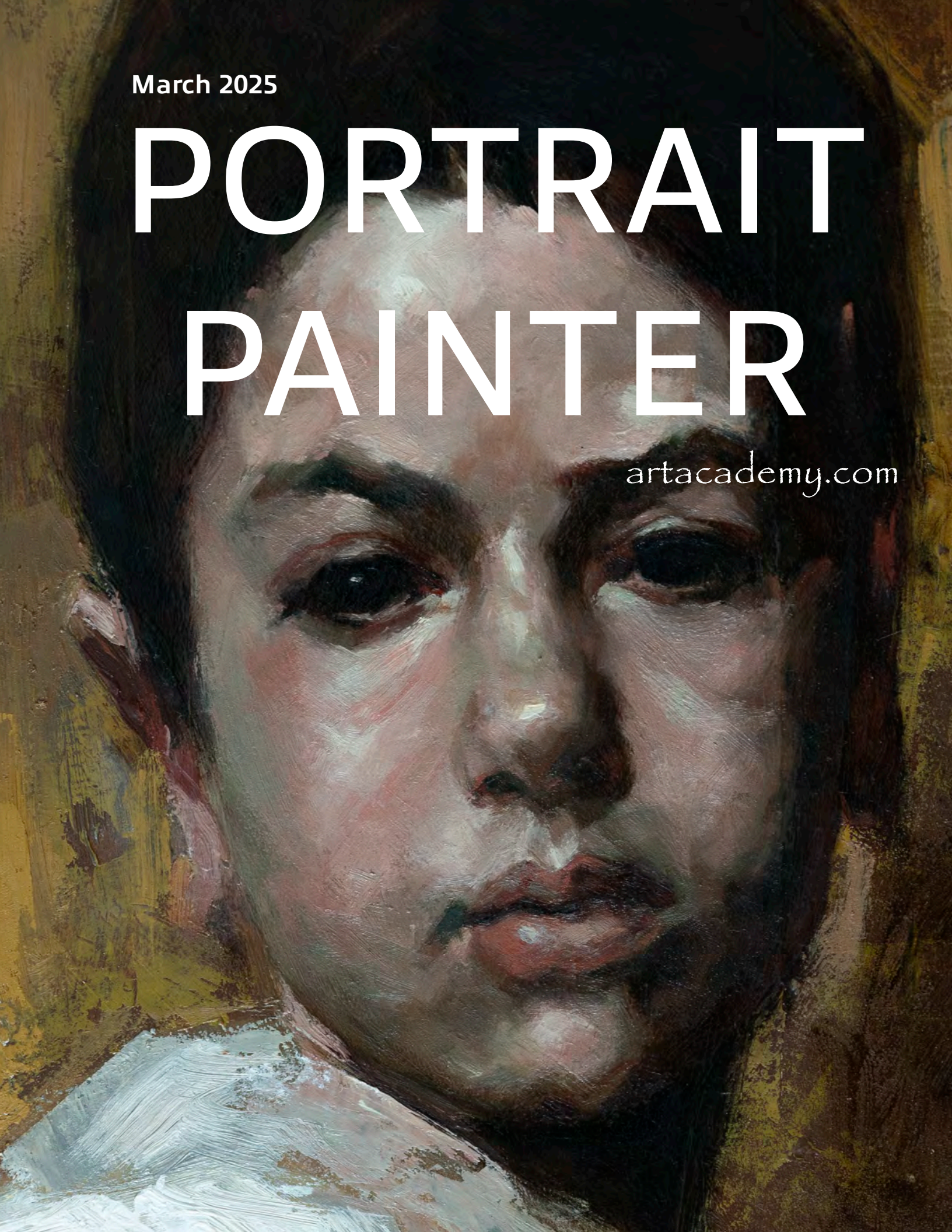# PORTRAIT PAINTER

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A Word ...

The March 2025 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER delves into the creative process of convergent/divergent thinking.

The Italian master Antonio Mancini is excellent fodder for the study of marrying logical convergent thinking and the wild child of divergence. With a touch of madness.

I also present the painting process of Mancini's *Carminella*, 1879, the subject of my recent Zoom workshop.

Michael Britton
March 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. Class size is limited to 8 participants.

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Antonio Mancini (1852-1930)

John Singer Sargent claimed that his close friend, Antonio Mancini, Sargent's senior by a mere four years, was the greatest living artist in the late 19th Century.

Jean-Léon Gérôme, the most famous artist and teacher in the latter nineteenth century, declared Mancini a phenomenon.

Sargent was biased in his estimate, of course. He and Mancini had a great influence upon each other. Whereas Sargent was endeared by the well-moneyed upper social class—commanding almost $250,000 a portrait in today's money—Mancini was cast out. Destitute and wholly reliant on the charity of Sargent and others.

Mancini painted at the forefront of the *Verismo* movement, an Italian response to 19th-century Academic Realism. His usual subjects included children of the poor, juvenile circus performers, and musicians he observed in the hard-scrabble streets of Naples.

John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Antonio Mancini*, Oil on canvas, 67 × 50 cm, 1902

Naples hasn't changed much in the intervening decades. It remains a gritty, harbor city where you had better keep a frosty eye on your wallet less a grubby gamin lift it.

In 1881, only 29 years of age, Mancini suffered a disabling mental illness. He left Paris for a four-month sojourn in a Napoli asylum to recuperate. Afterward, in 1883, he moved to Rome where he lived for twenty years before settling in Frascati until 1918, before again returning to Rome after the conclusion of the First World War.

Mancini is a difficult artist to categorize: his paintings give a sense of skirmishes of contradictory impulses: academic idealization, gritty realism, bravura society-portrait brushwork and thick, modern-looking impastos slathered and scarred with a palette knife, a paella of dictions. And a shell-shocked dose of madness.

Mancini's paintings lay bare the conflicts that great artists usually resolve and lesser ones are brought down by. Mancini's legacy resides in that painful place of being at the forefront of the second rank alongside a fellow Italian painter, Amedeo Modigliani.

In his early thirties, Mancini adopted the use of what he called a graticola in his work. A graticola is a grid of wires stretched within a frame. It is somewhat like the drawing aid used since Durer's time. Mancini would place a graticola in front of his model, the other affixed to his canvas. Mancini being Mancini bespoke his graticola with diagonals and paper wrapped strings.

Why Mancini felt compelled to use a graticola is curious to say the least. Mancini possessed an absolute mastery of drawing. Drawing through a grid is the purview of those who cannot strike shape, who cannot draw.

I know, I know ... the things I say. No wonder I never get invited to things.

Antonio Mancini, *Portrait of Sylvia Hunter*, Oil on canvas, 1901

For whatever reason Mancini felt compelled to use a graticola it did result in a spectral abstract structural surface that is highly engaging.

Richard Schmid proffered that "... Mancini used this graticola ... to make himself, while in the act of painting, to forget that what he was painting were things, like flowers, but rather that they were shapes of color! We think we are painting flower petals, a nose, or an eye, when what we are really seeing are the shapes of color that come together to make up what we are seeing. When Mancini looked at his subject through those little squares of his device he was forcing himself to look at his subject as an abstraction. He was forcing himself to see it simply as an arrangement of shapes of color, value, and edge."

Sorry Richard, I'm not buying that explanation. An artist of Mancini's calibre would readily reduce concrete facial elements into fractalities of colored shape and relationships. In other words: serving it up in the abstract (to quote his good pal John Sargent).

Perhaps Mancini employed the graticola as a vehicle for deliberating fractal recursions. He wouldn't be the only one:

In 1999 physicist Richard Taylor claimed Jackson Pollock's drip paintings were not just splattered paint, but excellent examples of fractal patterns. His research even led him to construct a "Pollockizer," a container suspended on a string that would fling paint onto a canvas. The Pollockizer could be adjusted to fling paint in either a chaotic or a regular pattern creating either fractal or nonfractal patterns. Taylor was so confident of his method of categorizing Pollock paintings by their fractal patterns, he claimed he could date and verify their authenticity by analyzing the paintings' fractal dimensions. He also ventured into art criticism by describing the drip paintings as "nature on a piece of canvas."

Perhaps Mancini's graticola was meant to serve as a screen, a divider, between prosaic reality and the Holy. Like the grating in a confessional separating the reprobate from the priest.

But these are wild stretches. I know it: you know it.

Likely the graticola was nothing more than an eccentricity.

Creative Process

Chirality | Entropy

When we are learning to draw and paint—assessing shape, proportion, angles, color harmonies and relationships—our thinking process is convergent. By necessity, logical and seeking ordered rationality.

These skills are our acquired foundation without which our art-making has no traction.

I've spoken at length in previous issues of PORTRAIT PAINTER of the layer cake of painting:

♦ Determing your canvas: dynamic, octaval, vinculum;
♦ Harmonious divisions of space;
♦ Notan: Light/dark harmony: Shape and pattern
♦ Color scheme
♦ Drawing
♦ Planar/Value structure
♦ Abstract structural surface

These layered elements comprising a painting are decided upon via a rational process of convergent thinking.

Antonio Mancini, *Lost in Thought*,
Oil on canvas, 100 x 60cm, 1897

This is only the beginning, the prologue of a painting's journey.

We strive for order, seeking rationales within a messy chaos.   On the other hand, we are drawn toward disorder. Almost compelled toward it. We like to break things. Unrelenting order is as boring as a god-awful data-entry job where one is soon torn between unscrewing one's skull from its occipital mount and bowling it down the aisle just to break the unrelenting tedium or just slitting our pale, sun-deprived wrists.

Convergent (order)   Divergent (entropy)   Convergent (order)

The sweet spot (Unity)
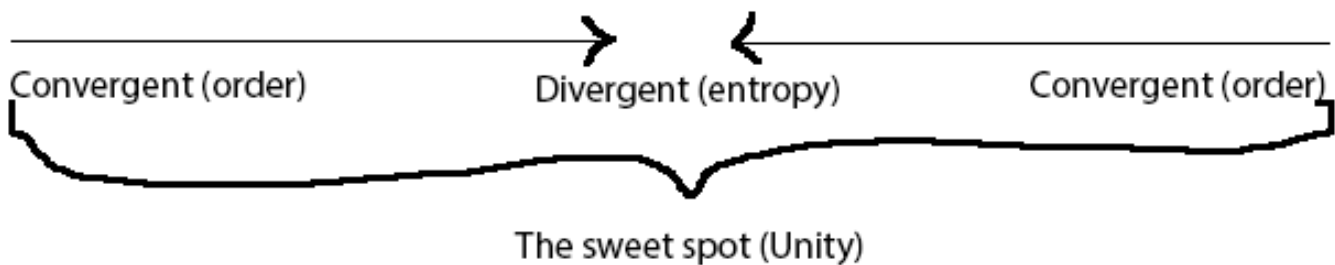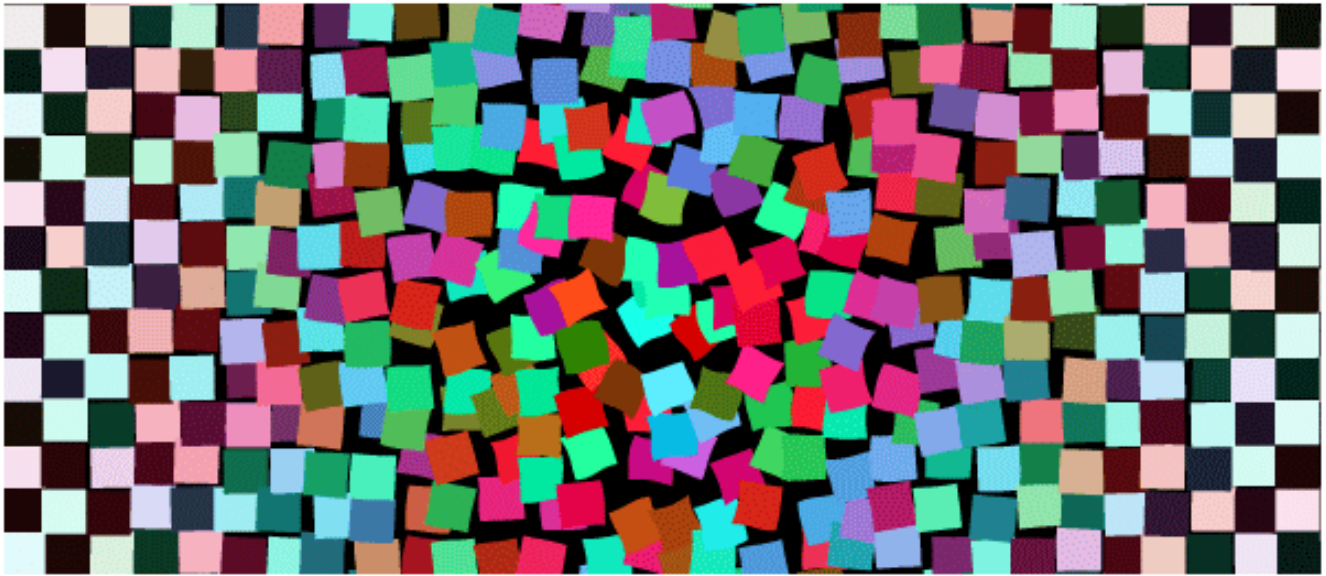
Divergent thinking is the wild child of logic. It thinks nothing of diving head-first into the rabbit hole and bringing felons home to dinner sending convergent mom's into hysterical fits.

Alas, unleashed wild childs often come to a bad end. Like a painting that lacks a solid convergent foundation.

Entropy (εν: en : in / τροπία (trope) : transformation) is the quantitative measure of disorder.

Entropy comes from the Greek word "entropia", which means "a turning toward". The term was coined by German physicist Rudolph Clausius in 1865, who combined the Greek word "τροπē", meaning "turning" or "change", with the prefix "en-", meaning "within".

It is entropy wherein expression flowers.   But it must have a coherent, underlying architecture otherwise it all falls apart.

Once an artist has acquired their tool kit (their foundation) the real work begins. Expect to endure a few years of anguished ambiguity between finding your developing your diction (voice) and your training. And you should scare yourself on occasion. This is the compost of artistic growth.

With every painting you need to find the sweet spot of order/disorder. Stop short and your painting will fail to thrive, a mere technical exercise.

Go too far and your painting will dissolve into an irresolute ennui (Melville's wonderful description of a whale giving up the ghost ('gallied' was the whaler's slang)).

Well, then, enough about me ... let's unpack Mancini's stellar painting *Lost in Thought*.

The canvas measures 60 x 100 cm whose ratio is 1.66666666666666666666 ad nauseum. Neither dynamic nor octaval it is a vinculum notation, approximating a 2:3 proportion.

Let's embark upon two deconstructive tacts: 1. Euclydian (dynamic symmetry) and 2. A basic partitioning of the 2/3 proportion.

First, establish the two overlapping rabatements (a square affixed to the end of the canvas and denoted as '1'). From there I draw a √2 rectangle (the top-most rabatement's diagonal is employed as a radius to determine √2 (1.4142).

A few things of interest: the diagonal runs through the wrist and the inferior pyramidal nasi (glabella if you're an academic stickler) of the head. And other elements. But let's not tarry ... we aren't finished.

√2 begats √3 (1.732) vis-a-vis a diagonal drawing thru the √2 and rendered as yet another radius. And voila, voila ... √3.

A few anchoring points affixing the thrust of the dress and the hem flit upon the √3's radial arc.

A

$\dfrac{1}{\sqrt{3}}$

$\dfrac{1}{\sqrt{3}}$

√3
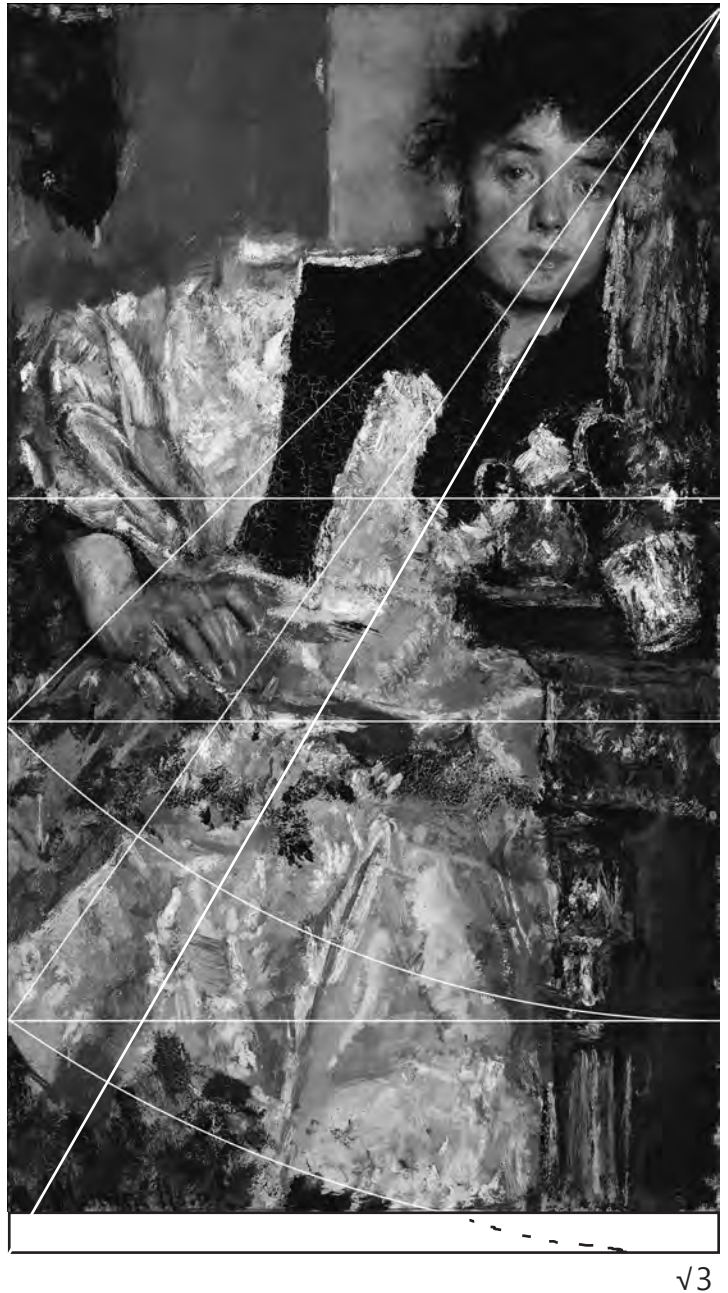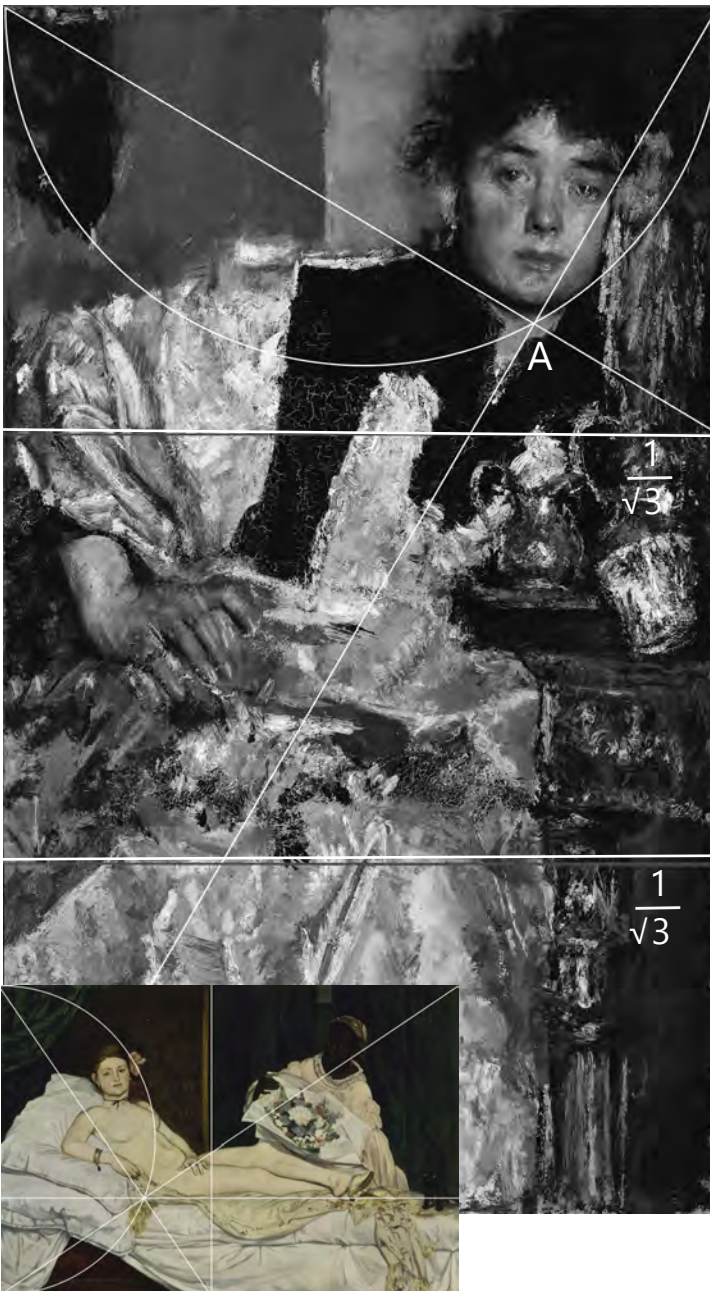
A useful composition device is to establish the reciprocals (1/x) with a semi-circle and rendering a diagonal thru 'A' to the edge of the canvas.

This is where Mancini has placed the head. Manet utilized the same geometry in *Olympia* (1863).

Reciprocals and rabatements are powerful tools of composition and harmonious divisions of pictorial space.

The other possibility is to deconstruct this vinculum 1.666 canvas into its three respective divisions and diagonals.

It, too, yields possibilites but is less elegant than the dynamic process.

Essentially the underlying geometry of a painting employs convergent thinking with a dose of playfulness.

Let's proceed to the next layer of painting which is color.

The color scheme is the secondary harmonic triad (green/orange/violet) plus tint, tone and shade buttressed by the yin/yang of white and black. Mancini very likely used Emerald green to powerful effect.

Determining a painting's color scheme employs both convergent and divergent thinking. Color harmony and interactions are to a large extent driven by physics, but discord, deliberately breaking the rules, can produce powerful effect.

A pochade, a small thumbnail sketch, is an useful for working out the infrastructure and gives an idea of how the painting will look from a distance.

The idea > concept of a painting worked out (mainly convergent with an element of divergence) we embark to the actual canvas. The inviolable rule, in my humble estimate, is always work general to specific—the BIG shape and then the raw planar construct.

Sargent would begin with a few succinct strokes of charcoal to strike the big shape and dark mass, what I prefer to call the arabesque. Terminology implies intent: arabesque implies rhythm and line. Sargent would then smear and rub the charcoal into his half-primed linen leaving a very faint arabesque.

Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (Gertrude Vernon) has been featured in numerous video workshops of uneven quality and ability. Unless I missed something, they all begin with a well-defined cartoon (preliminary drawing). An example is John Howard Sanden's video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POV-AbTjiAt4]

Not only does Sanden begin with an articulated cartoon he embarks on the vivacious Gertrude with a small brush!! Forsooth!!!

And to think that I'm the one who is tarred and feathered and shame-walked down storied West 57th Street.

Less my well-deserved apoplexy get the better of me, let's move on ...

Commercially prepared canvas today is far, far too white and brilliant. Even lead-primed canvases are too bright for Sargent's agenda. Hence, a light imprimatura of yellow ochre vaguely tinged with black and raw umber approximate Sargent's canvas.

According to Julie Heyneman and Henry Haley, students of Sargent, Sargent would be-gin with massing in the background with a large brush (figure at least 1½ inch round) leaving a reservoir of canvas for the figure/head with an overlap of roughly an inch. Unity and Edges would quite possibly have been Sargent's rallying call.

The initial middle half-tones of the figure/head would be served up in the abstract so that it resembles a wig-maker's block.

Sargent's process was sculptural, he placed his color values very much like a sculptor would plug in pieces of clay with an sympathetic concor-dance to the underlying form where-in the portrait would gradually reveal itself.

Once you learn how to strike shape and establish the proportions of the facial matrix the stumbling block most students face is constructing the interiority of the face.

I find a very useful tool when tiling-in the facial planes is to look for trian-gles. Triangles are the painter's best friend and, unlike the myriad range of rectangles, there are only three: equilateral, isoceles and lagging far behind is the right-angle triangle.

1

1/3

1/9

1/27

1/81
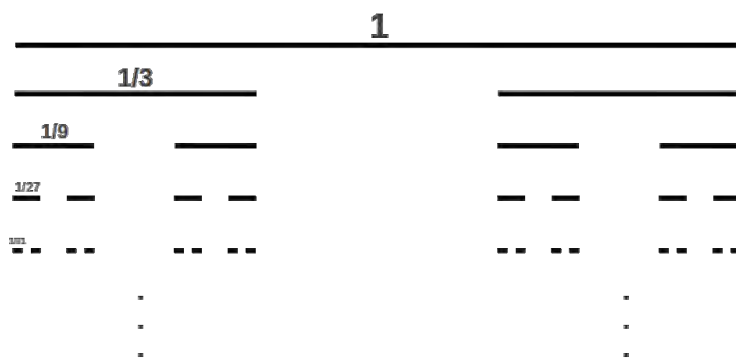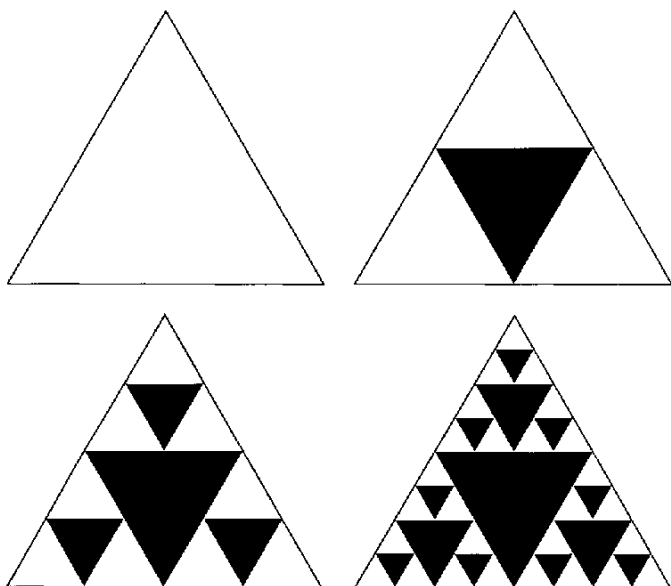
Left: Sierpinski triangles is a deterministic fractal recursion formed by connecting the midpoints of the sides of an equilateral triangle. This congruent process is repeated indefinitely.

Right: The Cantor Set demonstrates the production rule of deterministic fractal recursions by simply dividing a line into three parts and removing the middle third. The process is repeated into infinity.

The Abstract Structural Surface
& Stochastic Fractal Recursions

It wasn't until 1975, yep, you read that right, that a slide-rule (the precursor to calculators that looks like a pair of copulating sticks with a lot of numbers printed on them) toting mathematician named Benoit Mandelbrot coined the phrase fractal in his fast-paced thriller *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*.

Fractal is derived from the Latin fractus, meaning 'broken'. Mandelbrot defines a fractal as "a rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be split into parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole."

Painting is a general to specific process. That rule is inviolable. It is a rank practice to begin with an eye, for example, and grow out the portrait like a toe fungus.

Triangles are a good example of fractality in painting—triangles begatting triangles. However, unlike Sierpinsky's example , things get a helluva lot more complex.

This is where divergent and intuitive thinking come into play. Experience and guidance will lead you to that wondrous garden. No one stumbles across this on their own. This is the brick wall that separates the self-taught from the trained.

But, as always, there is a caveat: illustrative, academic painting is also denied a visa. Academic painting is convergent. Good painting goes beyond merely modeling, colored form.

It is in the abstract structural surface, supported by the infrastructure of convergent thinking (geometry, drawing, color, etc.) that divergence comes into full play.

It is your autographic mark-making, brush work and idiosyncracies that enthrall the viewer.
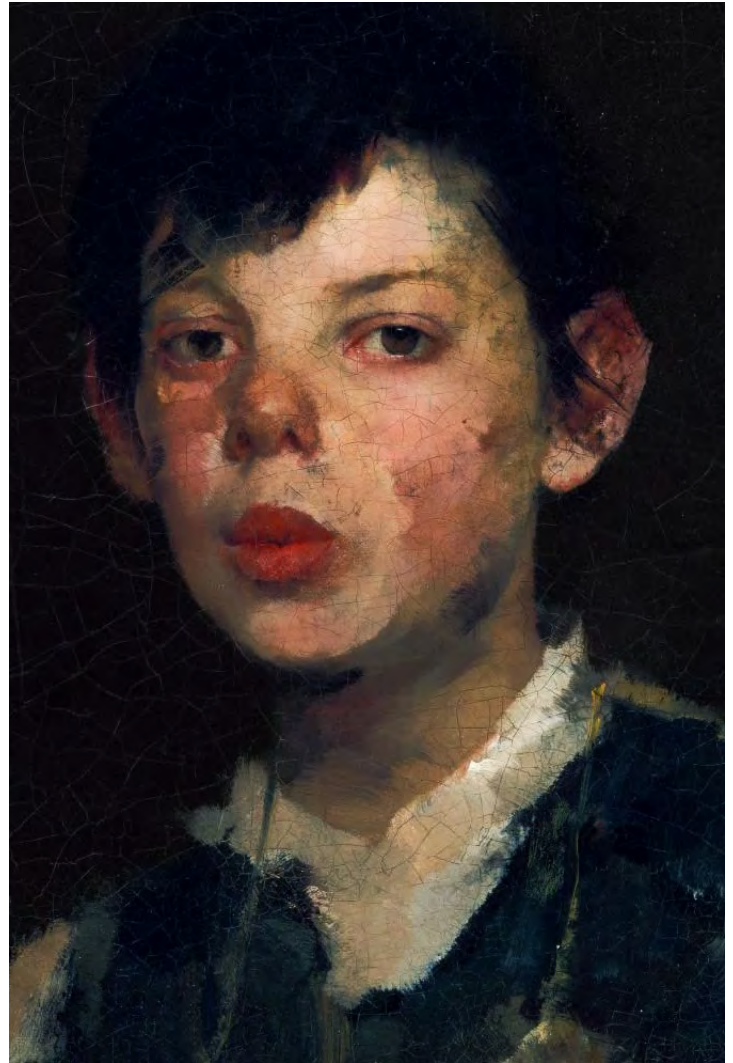
Often the abstract structural surface is the battleground of expression. Some days things go swimmingly—like a dip in the pond on a hot, summer day with a belly full of fried chicken and potato salad.

Many times it is a bloody, profanity-laced affair replete with much additive/subtractive scraping down with palette knife, brush handle and fingers until a satisfactory expressive resolution is achieved. Finding that sweet spot of convergence/divergence.

The American artist Frank Duveneck's (born in 1825 in Covington, KY) *Whistling Boy* exemplies the elements of convergence/divergence. His bravura abstract

Frank Duveneck, *Whistling Boy*, 1872

structural surface, informed by Frans Hals, solidly portrays the zeitgeist of mid-19th Century middle America. He reminds me of Huckleberry Finn (written between 1876 and 1883).

But expressive fractal divergence only works when buttressed by a sound foundation. Otherwise the painting fails to convey its message, to engage the viewer—it is gallied.

For the beginning artist this presents a very real conundrum. A dilemna even. Perhaps the soundest route is to focus on the gathering of as many tools of your craft as you can manage. If you're more comfortable beginning with a cartoon, do so. Sooner or later you will find it dispensable. Of course, when embarking on a large, complex work a cartoon is well advised.

Which begs the question: just how far should one pursue an academic education? At what point does one lose the art in pursuit of technical excellence?

As with convergent/divergent creative process there is a sweet spot.

Absolutely, you need to know how to draw. You need to acquire a technical skill-set. Do you need to spend six months or a year on a drawing? My feeling is that it becomes counter-productive. Better to spend that year on developing your striking skills and acquiring insight into the layered structure of painting.

But we all have our own needs and ambitions and there are no easy answers. My sage advice is to beware the didactic instructor who insists there is only one true path.

From the archives: The cartoon is a linear drawing whose purpose is to be transferred onto the canvas.

In my cartoon of Ruben's Clara Serena I show you how to first strike shape to a specific size and establish the facial proportions. The features and expression are then articulated and the overall mapping of the light/dark pattern is fixed.

This 46½ minute video (it's resolution, although not HD, is still quite clear and serviceable) is available for a short time only. Until March 31st.

$12.95

There is no right way to paint. There is no wrong way. Either a painting is beautiful and compelling or it is possessed of an irresolute ennui. Gallied.

Carminella

My recent Zoom workshop focused on the interplay of cool/warm flesh tones in Mancini's evocative painting *Carminella*.

Carminella is characterized by a solidity of form of light and chiaroscuro that convey a strong psychological rendering.

As was Sargent's dictum we approached Carminella through the eyes of a sculptor beginning with striking the big shape (the armature) and blocking-in the primary dark pattern.
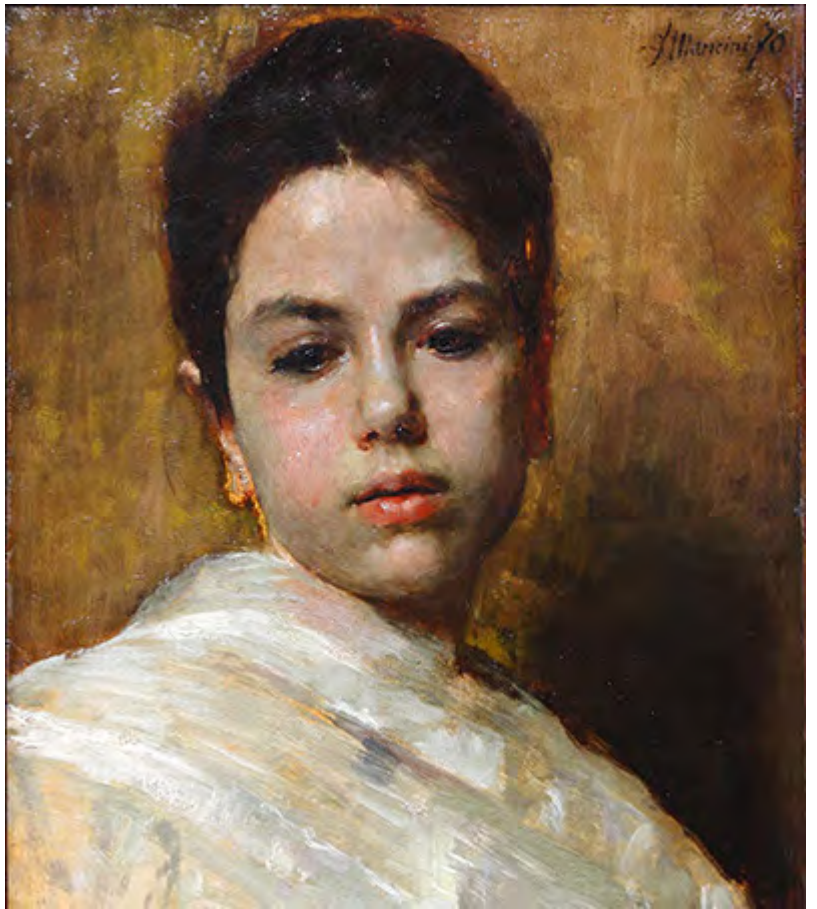
Antonio Mancini, *Carminella*, 1879

This establishes both the gesture and the likeness. The focus of the workshop was on the cool/warm interplays of flesh tones so I wasn't concerned with Mancini's original composition.

The initial half tones are served up in the abstract as if I were modeling in clay.

Strategy is an important element in painting. It is well-advised to strike the èbauche a little darker and warmer than what the final intent will be. The reasoning: it is much better and easier to later lighten/cool a value. If you overshoot a value don't paint over it, scrape it out. Otherwise you are risking a muddy effect.

The èbauche, to a large extent, employs convergent thinking. This is where the facial matrix (proportions and angles) are established within the big shape, the arabesque.

I draw and mass with the large brush looking at my subject with soft eyes—eyes that are slightly out of focus. This allows me to better gauge overall shape and its attendant angles.

The initial half-tones, a light, middle and dark, are roughly spotted in as if I am plunking in clumps of clay. The rule of thumb when spotting color/value notes is to: first, choose your value; then its placement; and then shape it with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form.

It is important to take your best guess at the drawing elements first and then check them with both the stylus (measuring stick) and plumb line (to assess both vertical and horizontal alignments). If you pre-measure your drawing you gravely retard the development of your drawing skills. **Never, ever pre-measure!**

Every time a correction is required, and there will be many, you are training your eye to see and more accurately assess shape and proportion.

Once the initial elements, figure/ground/ edge, of the èbauche are laid in I assiduously check and verify all of my proportions. Errors are rectified by scratching in with my wood stylus.

It is an asymptotic, sculptural process of working general to specific.

Once the èbauche is dried the palette is extended to eleven colors including Naples yellow and Cadmium green light.

Pentimento is derived from the Italian *pentirsi*: to repent.

Again, the measures are checked before oiling in.

Almost as much time is spent mixing our colors as is the actual painting. Get the color values wrong and you're in for a world of pain.

A range of eleven color values, from light to transition dark (the terminator or bedbug line at the edge of the dark pattern), from cool to warm, are established. Prepare a generous amount of paint. Don't starve your palette—at the end of each session you can pop your palette into the freezer to keep them fresh for the next day of painting if you're using lead white and calcium carbonate.

My practice is to place a copious mix of Cadmium green light and burnt sienna off to the side. It is an extremely useful tone for tempering flesh values.

This is our base palette from which color/values are adjusted as necessary.

It is in the Pentimento that we begin to build up the abstract structural surface vis-a-vis spotting color value notes and developing form with a sculptural sensibility. The brush, brush handles, palette knives, stylus and fingers are all pressed into service seeking a material resolution of paint and expression.

Cools are played off of warms. All the while the portrait emerges.

And sometimes ... well, that's not true ... more often than one cares to admit the painting will go awry. We become bewitched by paint. We stray off of the path to an ill end. That is why you need to step back from your work constantly and interrogate it with hostile intent.

At regular intervals I will work the painting inverted, upside down. This abstracts the form: an eye is no longer an eye but a compendium of colored, plastic shapes. I seek out triangles. They are much needed friends always willing to extend a hand to pull one out of the quagmire of muddied paint.

I will review the painting in a mirror. 'Tis not for the faint hearted. All of your errors will come screaming forth like malevolent banshees nursing long-held grudges. Without pity.

At times painting is a war. No prisoners are taken. No tender mercies given. Neither milk nor cookies offered to the savaged soul.

The finishing, the finire, is the full flowering of form and color. It is in the finire that we strive for the full stretch from light to dark / cool to warm.

All of the major issues, and traumas, should be resolved at this point. There will always be minor issues but a sound structure can endure and even render minor issues with charm. Major issues, however, will require that the painting be scraped down and revisions embarked upon. An unhappy prospect, to be sure, but one that usually results in a much better painting.

Fortunately, my Carminella did not require scraping down. But I would not hesitate to do so. Although I would brace myself with a strong cuppa tea and a small measure of sorrow beforehand.

The finire is not the venue for timidity and preciousness. This is where your voice comes to full fruition. Trilling and chittering with confidence.

My brush flickers and moves across the canvas like a manic waterbug. Touching upon a cool before leaping to a warm. On the best painting days my brush dances and prances and swoons with light touches and when called upon swaggers with bravura. Codas present themselves like love-struck adolescents. But I maintain a respectful distance and a gimlet eye is always held in reserve.

Do not allow yourself to be bewitched by paint. Sparkling color's come-hither entreaties can lead you into an abyss—a bottom of a deep well—where everything collapses and the painting, once filled with promise, lays in mangled ruin.

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. Class size is limited to 8 participants.

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.

Portrait Painting Zoom Workshop

John Singer Sargent's Lady Agnew of Lochnaw

Beginning Tuesday, March 25 - April 15, 2025
@ 18:30 - 21:00 PST (4 sessions)
Beginner to Intermediate $320

The Syllabus:

Session 1: **Serving It Up in the Abstract—the Ébauche**

This workshop faithfully follows Sargent's painting process beginning with striking the arabesque (the BIG shape) and massing in the primary dark pattern with charcoal on a half-primed and very lightly tone canvas. You'll learn how to verify and correct the arabesque and measures.

The background is first scrumbled in thinly leaving a reservoir for the head/figure. From there the initial half-tones are served up in the abstract, rendering the portrait planarly to resemble a wig-makers block, conveying a solidity of form. This, too, establishes the likeness and gesture.

Session 2: Pentimento—the first pass

Pentimento is derived from the Italian 'pentirsi', meaning to repent. The ébauche is corrected as needed, our palette expanded, you'll learn how to mix convincing flesh tones and the planar facial forms are developed vis-a-vis tiling and spotting color/value notes and the portrait begins to emerge. This is a sculptural process of building facial form and is the painting process Sargent learned from his teacher, Carolus-Duran.

Session 3: Pentimento—the second pass

In the second pass we push our boundaries beginning with an understanding of cool/warm color interplay and building up the head with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical structures to render solid, 3-dimensional effect.

The features and gaze are now articulated.
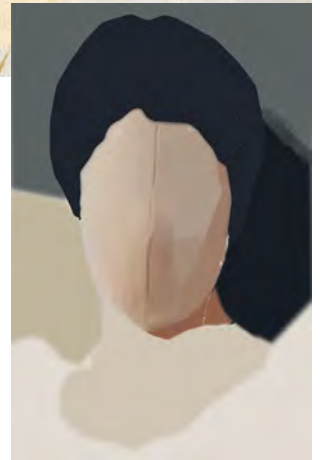
Session 4: Finire

The finire is the striving for the full stretch of light/dark and cool/warm interplay with bravura brush work..

It is within the middle to light values that your voice is expressed through the plastic construction of the abstract structural surface. The brush, the palette knife, your fingers and wooden stylus are pressed into service to render an engaging statement and dialogue. By pushing your boundaries, you graduate from mere image-making to art-making.

In addition to the Zoom recording, the workshop is filmed in 4K and subsequently edited to 2K, there is very minimal noticeable difference other than the manageable file size of 2K. The workshop is downloadable and is your's to keep for future reference.

To register contact: michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com

Carminella: the ébauche

Carminella: the pentimento

Carminella: the finire