






# PORTRAIT PAINTER

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**In the November 2024 issue:**

-  Tondo: Study of an Adolescent
-  Materiality & Expression:  
Rembrandt's Self Portrait at age 63
-  Painting Alla Prima Portraits from  
Photographs

# A Word ...

The November 2024 issue of **PORTRAIT PAINTER** is focused on the materiality of oil paint and its expressive diction.

Given the catastrophe of the October issue I have reined myself in. My opinions crushed as much as I can tolerate.

... moving on ... herein I present the painting process of Rembrandt's *Self Portrait at the Age of 63* and *Tondo: Study of an Adolescent*

Michael Britton  
November 2024



## **Painting Alla Prima Portraits from Photographs**

My upcoming **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, November 12 and 19, 2024 at 18:30 PST for two sessions. \$160

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](mailto:michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com) for the syllabus and supply list and to register.



# reative process

## Tondo: Study of an Adolescent

Tondo is a circular canvas.

For my Study of an Adolescent I decided to place the tondo within a rectangular format.

Given the subject matter of an adolescent girl/woman I know full well I am waltzing into a minefield whistling a not-so-merry tune. This is the narrative realm of Bougeareau, the realm of virginal nymphs. The odds of descending into treacly banality are against me, but I am resolved to follow my instincts and keep Frans Hals and Rembrandt foremost on my brush while still licking my wounds from the disaster of the October issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER. In our Instagram era failure is akin to summary execution. Off with his head!



My practice is to dive right in with a loaded brush. First striking the arabesque, the big shape to both establish the gesture and likeness, followed by a broad blocking-in of the large dark pattern. A warning light immediately blinks on: The mouth is askew of the facial angle. But no need to despair. It's an easy fix. The hard thing is pinpointing where things tend to go wrong.

It takes about five minutes to strike and block-in. Of course that is five minutes and thirty years of painting.

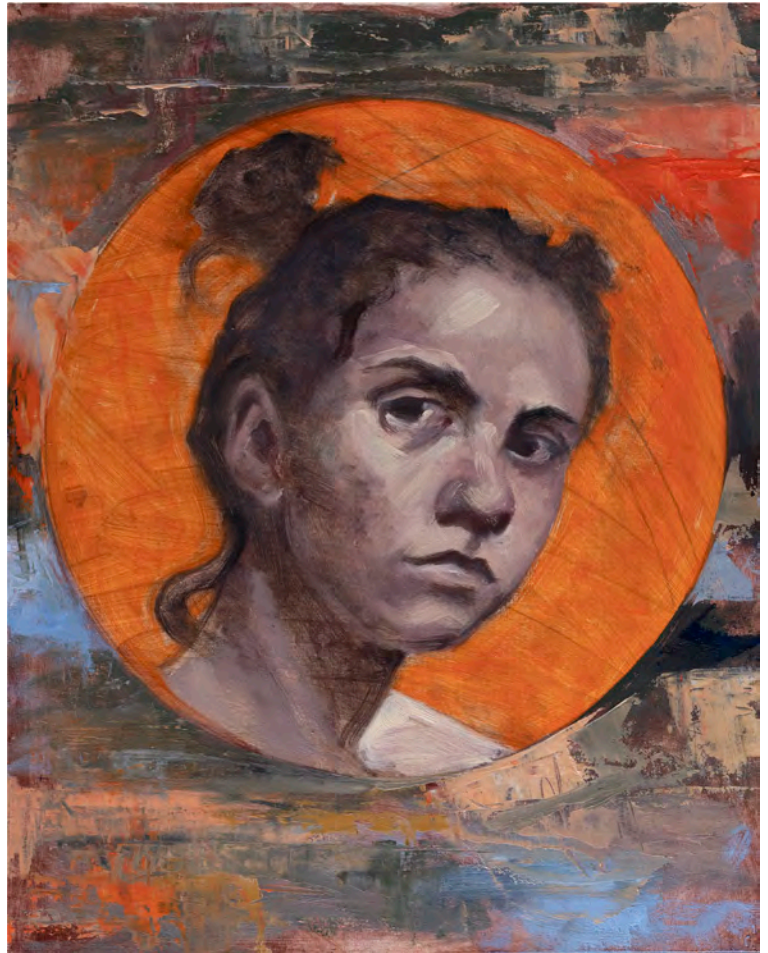
And in that initial five minutes a narrative challenge has arisen. Needless to say, I have no wish to trundle forth into the banal wasteland of bad art. On the other hand, an overly acerbic approach would read too cynical.

The best path to take is to just let the paint be your compass. It is the paint and your abstract structural surface (your autographic mark-making with the brush, the knife, fingers, graffito, etc.) that is the diction of your story. On a good day paint reads with a euphoni-ous lilt. On a bad day it simply collapses into a vulgar stream of exasperation.

In the ebauche ambition coalesces into an agenda.

I seek a trony (character study) that is as fresh as hot biscuits with a veil of melancholia. The melancholia part comes easy to me; the fresh part not so easy.

Painting fresh demands an economy of means. No fuss, no muss, no prisoners, no belaboring an element.



Alas, I am off to an unpromising start. My gamine is cloaked with hostile intent. At first I pin the blame fully on her eyes, instead it is the mouth. That damned mouth will be ruination of me yet.

I have larger issues that command my attention. Namely, the figure/ground relationship. The ground refers to the background. More than drawing, more than color and form, UNITY is primary.

Sometimes I am asked by a student of what to do for a background. There is no easy answer. Much depends upon your narrative, what is your story line and how to express it.

The ground requires as much consideration in the beginning as do the figural elements. The important element is color. More specifically color harmony. There are two basic harmonies one can choose: the primary harmonic triad (red, blue, yellow) or the secondary harmonic triad (green, orange, violet). Plus tint, tone and shade. And color value structure: high key, middle key or dark key.

When the need for fresh air beckons, I gather my painting kit and lunch and head off into the yonder. Plein air painting is a liberating balance to the studio. Like painting a portrait alla prima it is a one-shot deal.

When it works well, it works splendidly. And when the painting fails to thrive, at least a pleasant day of painting was had.

Rather than yet another mundane ground for my tondo I figured that perhaps I could unite this landscape with the portrait. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. If you always paint the same, the result will be the same. Better to think of painting as a voyage of discovery rather than one of production.



The middle stage of a painting is the *Pentimento*, derived from the Italian *pentirsi* : to repent.

There should be no major drawing issues at this point. However, there will always be minor drawing issues, minor issues that accumulate gradually, and suddenly bring the whole house down. I correct them as I go along knowing all the while that if you see one cockroach in the pantry ...

A solid structural foundation will tolerate a few minor drawing issues. Up to a point.

It is in the *pentimento* that I resolve the pictorial issues: color, pasticity, rhythm, etc.

Here, too, the diction of my narrative takes form. The diction (the play of brush work and color) must be congruous with the subject matter in both narrative and emotion.

A slick, academic rendering, aka Bougeareau, would be anathema. Even in its time, the late 19th Century, Bougeareau was dated. Oh well, I've beaten that horse to death.

As previously mentioned, my agenda is a painting that reads as fresh as hot biscuits. I can't help the melancholic part. That's just me.

Thus in the pentimento I construct the facial forms sculpturally. Each brush stroke is considered and rendered with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form and the edges knitted. Not blended! Forsooth! Blending is destructive of form.

It is the forehead, that damnable frontal eminence, that gives me kittens. It is easily overmodeled. For me the forehead is the scree to be clambered over with skinned knees and bloodied fingers on the way up painting mountain.



Less I cry me a river I sense that even Rubens had trouble with the forehead. This is from Clara Serena at 12 years. But never mind the troubles ... look at how he sculpted the light plane of the forehead with thick vertical paint strokes. Absolutely brilliant! And a key to Rubens' thinking process.

Once past the forehead things get easier. Avoid being feature centric. You need to look past the features and into the building blocks of facial form. All the while seeing through the eyes of a sculptor.

And all the while, too, articulating facial form and paving the way for my final assault—the finire. Not only do I want the painting to read as fresh as hot biscuits, I also want it to appear that it was easy, an effortless endeavor.

It never comes easy.



Finishing should not be about refinements of form. Sure, there is some of that but the focus should be on Unity foremost and a space-invasive, three-dimensionality.

That means going for the full stretch from light to dark. Better to go too far than timidly stopping short. At worse, you can scrape down and attack it again, better armed. Sargent never hesitated for a moment to scrape down a timid passage.

I think of paint as like colored clay. Adding calcium carbonate and a drop of egg yolk to my paint stiffens it. It bolsters and gives form to my auto-graphic diction, my abstract structural surface.

To further push the three-dimensionality I knit the back of head into the

ground. Deliberately blurring the edge, pushing the depth of field.

Color is the prime material of painting. It is employed, amongst many other elements, to articulate form and expression. My biggest fear is to plunge into treacle. The subject matter, an adolescent girl, is a cultural minefield.

The pink hues express exuberant youth; the green hues temper it. It is a color tension that narrates the anguished conflicts of early adolescence. The green reflected light on her jaw is informed by Rubens, a powerful painting device of his.



Howard Hodgkins, *Storm*, 1996-97

I always look at paintings. Like a pickpocket on a crowded boulevard looking for something to lift. I may not have an immediate need for my purloined booty, but it is stored away for possible future use.

It is in the finire, the finishing (whatever that is) that I constantly evaluate the formal elements. The tyranny of the tondo needed to be broken to unify the ground with the figural.

The British artist Howard Hodgkins (19XX-xxxx) was an extraordinary colorist and painter. His work was informed by Turner and Constable. His English forbearers.

There are many lessons to be had from abstract expressionism, and minimalism, too, that can be effectively applied to representational/realist painting.

Celebrate paint for its intrinsic materiality. Don't censor it by suppressing its wondrous possibilities in the pursuit of formal academic excellence.

With Hodgkins in mind a dynamic chromium green was slashed within the circumference of the tondo. Go bold or go home. Not only does the chromium green act as a unifying conduit of figure and ground it is also struck so that it reciprocates and plays upon the deliberate fractal recursions within the head.

Painting is a layer cake beginning with initial shape. Rather than repeating myself ad nauseum the following is lifted from the Summer 2024 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER.



# The Layer Cake of Painting

The power of great painting lay in its appeal to the unconscious mind of the viewer. That is the staying power that entrances the viewer continually year after year, decade after decade.

Rather than descend into sugary palaver of the art spirit let's take a hard-eyed look at painting's layered architecture.

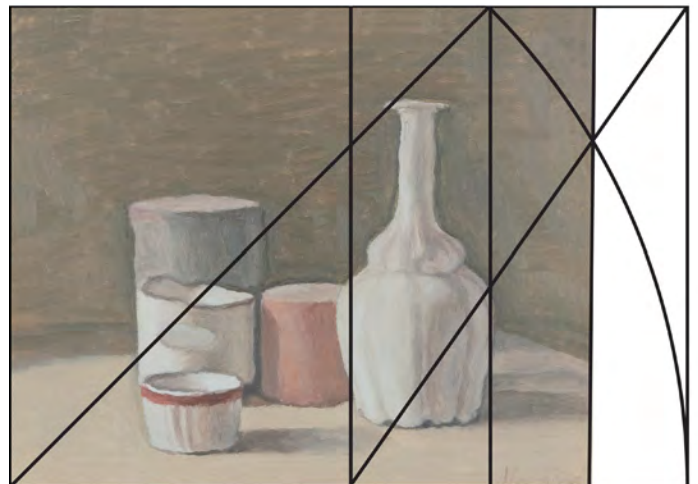
Painting and drawing is essentially about shape. How wide, how tall and what are the angles.

The shape, the dimensions, of your canvas is the first important consideration. Obviously your canvas must be sympathetic and concordant to your subject. Hence your initial decision—yep, painting is about making decisions, good and bad—is whether your canvas is Octavol (divisions of eight), Dynamic Symmetry (Euclidian) or a fusion of both.

For the beginning artist I recommend the 11 x 14" canvas which is a  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  dynamic rectangle (the square root of the golden rectangle). This  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  canvas painlessly initiates the beginner into the wonderful, wonderful world of dynamic symmetry. There is simply no better starting point.

As for the perennially popular 16 x 20" canvas ... it is neither Octavol nor Dynamic ... it is simply dead on arrival.

**Next layer:** Within your determined canvas come the harmonious pictorial divisions of space. This is the interplay of rabatements and reciprocals, an erector set of dynamic compositional nuts and bolts. Shape, like color, has its complementaries and harmonies. I discuss this at fair length in both the February and March 2024 issues of Portrait Painter.





Courbet, *Woman in the Waves* - Notan

**Second layer: Notan.** Notan is a Japanese term, adopted by the Impressionists and post-Impressionists, meaning black/white harmony. I group drawing into the Notan as per John Singer Sargent's teaching. I first 'serve it up in the abstract.' This is a sculptural mode of painting, much more powerful and effective than the illustrative mode of coloring in a preliminary drawing. It is the Notan that sticks a painting to the wall.

**Third layer: Color.** Color is the prime material of painting. Essentially there are two color harmonies: the Primary (blue, red, yellow) and the Secondary (orange, green, violet) plus tint, tone and shade. Three-dimensional form is rendered vis-a-vis spotting color/value notes. Very much like plonking down colored pieces of clay and pushing and pulling them until a satisfactory resolution is achieved.

Spotting color/value notes incurs four progressive elements: choose your color value, position it, shape it concordantly to the underlying anatomical structure, and edging or knitting your forms into a concrete, unified expression. i.e., portrait painting.

And for the love of god never call it blending. Blending is destructive of form. Knitting is constructive. Terminology implies intent.



Edgar Degas, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1867

**Fourth layer: Abstract structural surface.** This is the show. The main event. The image in all its splendid glory. It is where your autographic brushwork comes alive!

However, it must be supported by the underlying structural elements. There is a saying that is well worth keeping in mind: You cannot polish shit.

And in conjunction with this abstract structural surface is a polemic of which I have no definite proof, just a feeling that seems to explain why some painters/paintings soar above all of the others.

This feeling originally manifested a few years ago while I was teaching Degas' *Portrait of a Young Woman*. I was intrigued by how each brush stroke played off of the other while simultaneously rendering form with an envious economy of means.

I had no words, nothing in my argot, of how to define and explain this interplay to my students. Most likely I mumbled something, most likely something incoherent that was readily dismissed by the class as the rambling discourse of an old man teetering on the cusp of senility.

For awhile I thought of this interlocking interplay as Reciprocity. But that didn't feel quite right.

**"Pathological monsters!" cried the terrified mathematician  
Every one of them a splinter in my eye  
I hate the Peano Space and the Koch Curve  
I fear the Cantor Ternary Set  
The Sierpinski Gasket makes me wanna cry  
And a million miles away a butterfly flapped its wings  
On a cold November day a man named Benoit Mandelbrot was born**

—Jonathan Coulton, lyrics from "Mandelbrot Set"

Permit me, for a moment or two, to escort you back to the traumas of adolescence and high school geometry. Squares, circles, vectors ... the stuff of pubescent nightmares ... is pretty much Euclidian geometry. Named after the toga draped Greek fella, Euclid.

Whereas dynamic symmetry (Euclidian geometry dressed up for an overpriced night out on the town) is employed in the early constructive stages of a painting. Namely the composition and the harmonious divisions of space, it doesn't quite play out in the abstract structural surface. Nonetheless, it is there like a pimple aching to burst free from the deep epidermis and always at the worst possible time.

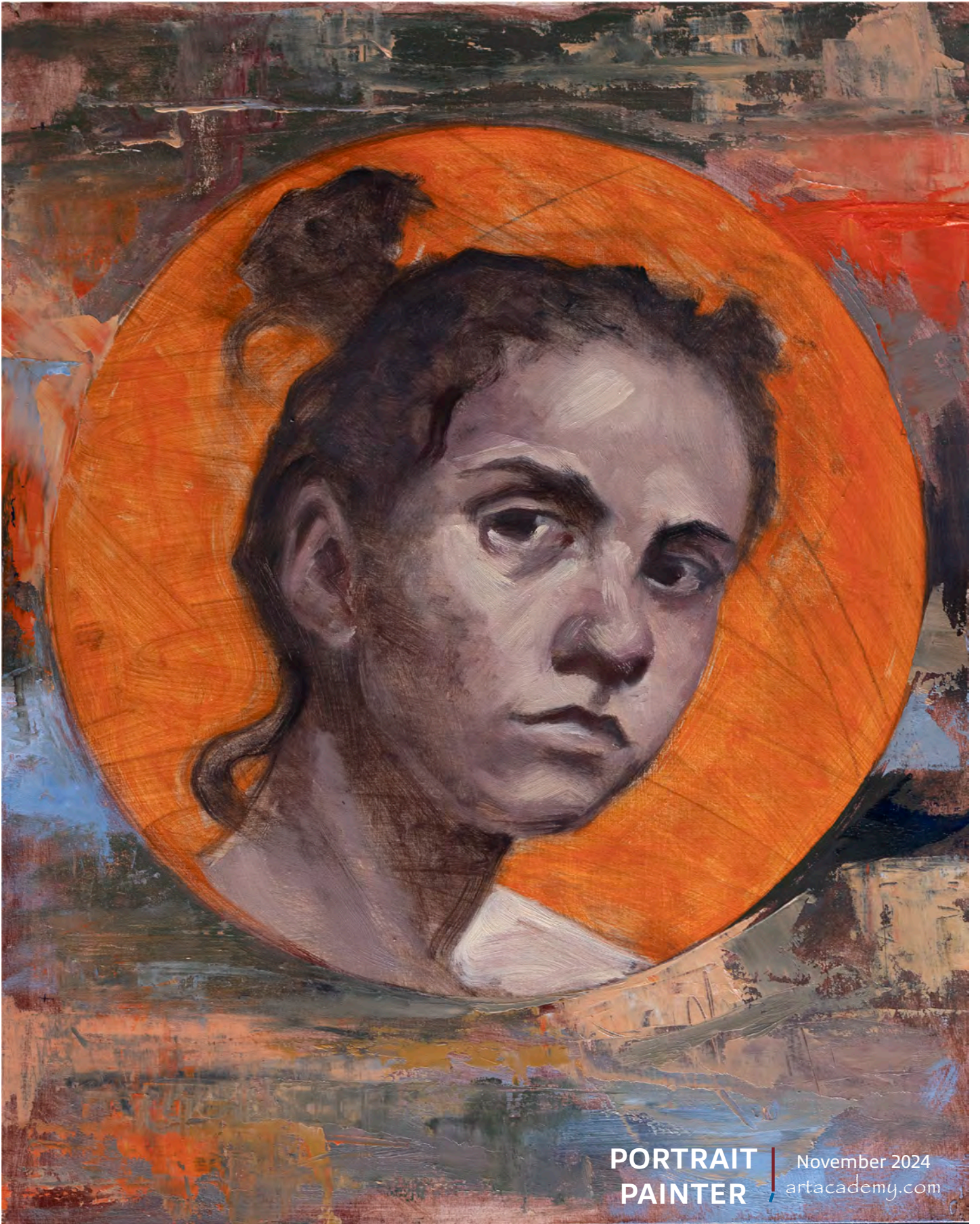
It wasn't until 1975, yep, you read that right, that a slide-rule (the precursor to calculators that looks like a pair of copulating sticks with lots of numbers printed on them) toting mathematician named Benoit Mandelbrot coined the phrase **fractal** in his fast-paced thriller *The Fractal Geometry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



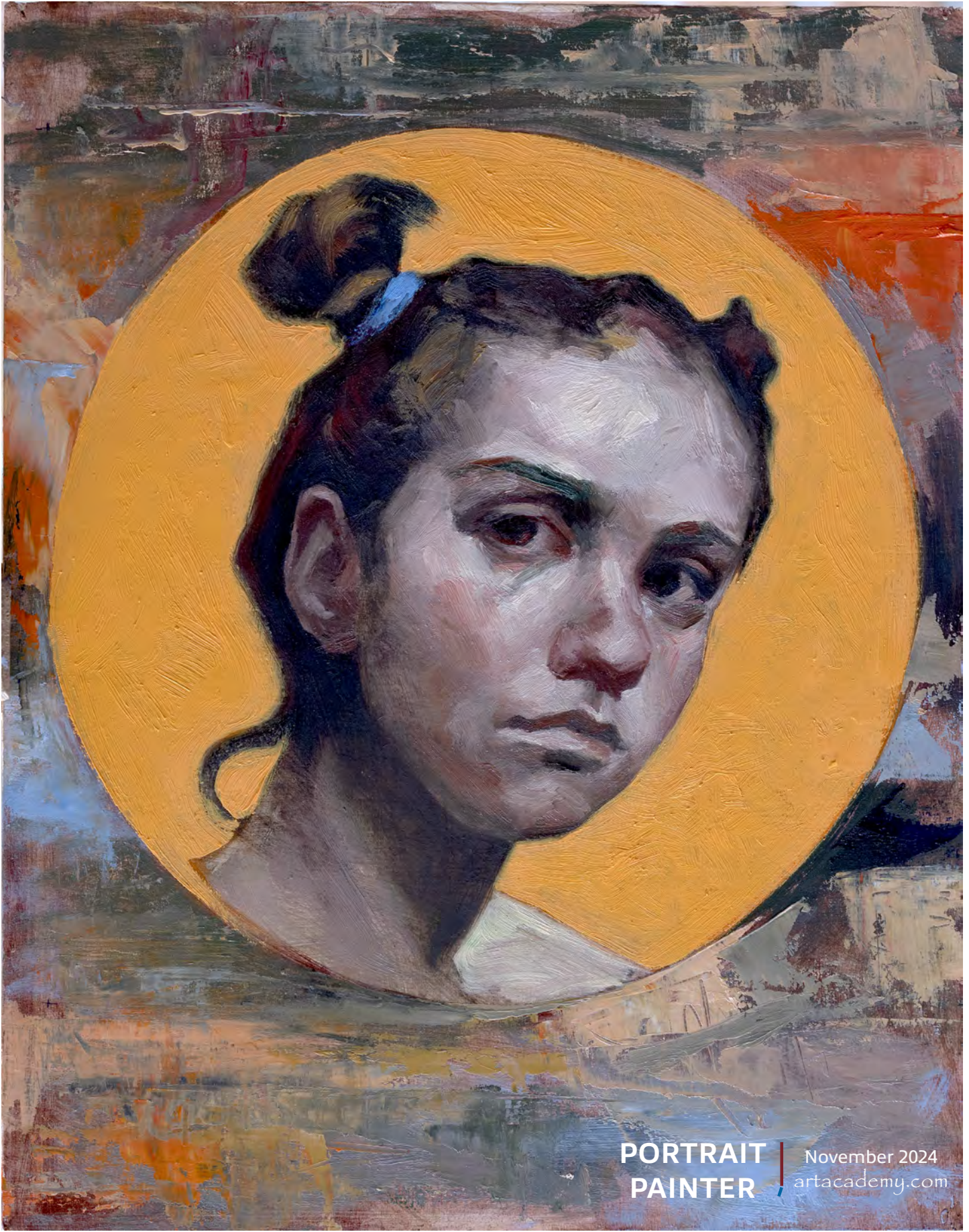
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## Painting Alla Prima Portraits from Photographs

Tuesdays, November 12 & 19, 2024  
@ 18:30 - 21:00 PST (2 sessions)  
Beginner to Intermediate \$160

To register contact:  
[michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com](mailto:michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com)

Alla Prima is loosely defined as first strike. That is, the portrait is done in a single session.

Painting alla prima is not painting manically. Instead it is a process of painting with a succinct economy of means—every brush stroke counts!

For the learning process the alla prima portrait is spread over two sessions. The first session is structural: You begin with striking the arabesque (the big shape) and establishing the facial proportions. From there you proceed to a 'dry' coloring-in. These are your training wheels.

The second session is the construction of plastic facial forms with a sculptural sensibility. To wit, you will learn how to apply your brush strokes and color with an empathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical forms, thus rendering a convincing 3-dimensional portrait that is as fresh as hot biscuits.

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# Materiality & Expression

## Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn — Self-Portrait at the Age of 63

Rembrandt, amongst many things, was an inveterate innovator in terms of oil paint's painting process and materiality.

It was in the mid-17th Century that painters began to break away from the rigid constraints of coloring-in the outlines of a preparatory drawing to a freer, more expressive directness.

Rather than layering color over a monochromatic grisaille, usually a black/white underpainting, painters began to paint directly. Gone were the finely rendered cartoons (preparatory drawings) that were transferred onto the canvas; instead, with a loaded brush in hand the arabesque was struck, the darks broadly blocked in and the half-tones served up in the abstract.

The result were paintings of significantly greater expression, vitality and spatial depth.

But time is a flat circle (Schopenhauer 101). The esteemed Victorian art critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900) didn't care much for Rembrandt. Nor Rubens. Frans Hals' name was uttered only in contempt. Likely accompanied with copious amounts of port flavored spittle. They were far too exuberant for his taste. Velàzquez was considered an all-right fellow though. To be fair, however, Ruskin was a champion of J.M.W. Turner, the English master.

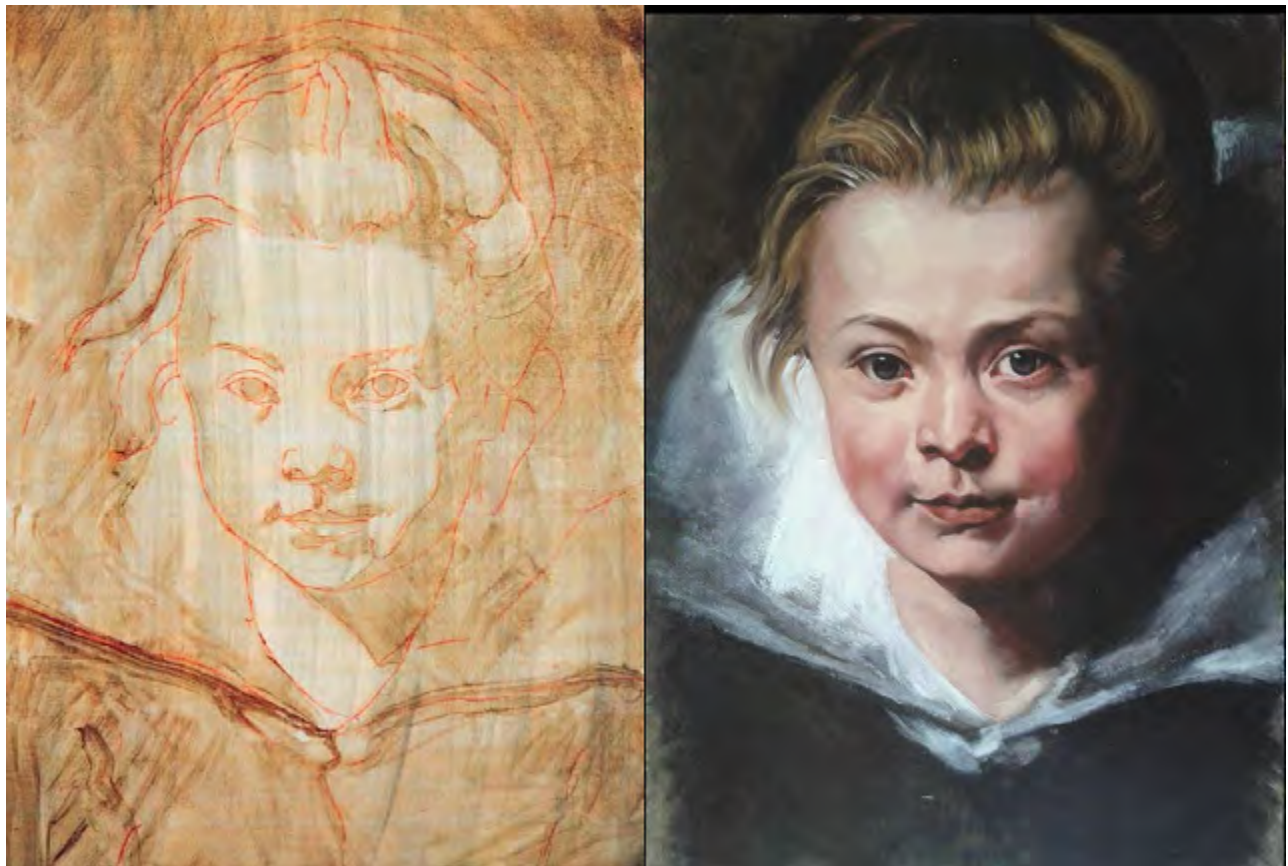
And so lay the groundwork for my lonely polemic. Another vain charge upon the wind-mills.



A dismayingly long, long time ago when I was a craven young man, I fell under the spell of academic pedagogy. It was the early days of the New York Academy of Art, recently birthed from a dank basement in the East Village before nestling snugly for a few years next to the Public Theatre on Lafayette Street that I truly began to learn my craft.

As with all institutions, internecine strife broke out. On one side were the adherents of Edwin Dickinson; on the other, the confederate disciples of Gérôme and Bouguereau. Alas, the ruined cohorts of Dickensen were sent packing, lugubriously dragging their paint kits into the dark netherlands of Brooklyn.

Sadly, I bolted from the Dickinson ranks. A shameful day, yes. But my tuition was free and I was a young man burdened with a pauper's wallet.



And thus I would begin my paintings with a cartoon, a preliminary drawing transferred onto my canvas, and steadfastly trundle forward, dutifully coloring it in. First a grisaille, following by the ébauche and so on and so forth. Thinking all the while what a splendidly talented young man I was.

Decades later the shame lingers. Like a mugshot buried deep in the archives of the New York City Police Department.

The problem with a preparatory drawing is that it can enslave you. Especially as one becomes more technically proficient, slowly but surely one assumes the mantle of a technician rather than that of an artist.

Painting is essentially a visual language that engages the viewer in dialogue, a shared experience. Hyperrealism is one language of painting, albeit its constant striving of technical excellence and optical veracity can tend to culminate more in visual spectacle than empathetic expression.

This is the fork in the road, the anguished ambiguity that every artist faces. Just how far should one pursue technical excellence before it diminishes artistic expression.

Whereas in my copy of Rubens' young daughter, Clara Serena, I employed a preliminary drawing I am pretty sure that Rubens did not. There is every indication that he painted directly, simultaneously striking the arabesque (the overall shape of head) and blocking-in followed by serving up the half-tones in the abstract. That is the only way a freshness and vitality can be achieved. My copy fails miserably in that regard. It is a technical piece offering up a visual spectacle of competency. But nothing more. My Clara lacks a soul.



Both paintings are of Clara Serena. Both by Rubens.

The left side painting is Clara at five years old. The right side painting is Clara at 12 years, a decidedly inferior work. Wisely abandoned. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, for whatever doubt that may have crept darkly into Rubens' genius, he took an illustrative approach.

The older Clara has none of the vitality of the younger piece. It lacks the 'oomph' that makes for great painting.

Perhaps the older Clara, a sickly young woman who died a short time after this portrait, lacked the vitality of her younger self. And her pallor informed Rubens' work. Perhaps, perhaps.

Every age defines what is considered 'good' art and what is 'bad' art. Art is political. It defines and is informed by the zeitgeist of its time.

In 1874, the year of the Impressionist's first showing, Jean Léon Gérôme was the most famous artist in France. Gérôme and his cohorts, Bouguereau included, ruled the Salon. Academic painting ruled supreme and was considered damn good art. That year over 500,000 tickets were sold; conversely the Impressionists managed only 3,500, give or take an indigent urchin or two who slipped past the rickety ticket booth of the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs.



Undoubtedly locale played a big role. The Salon was housed in the Imperial Palace, the Impressionists in a shopping mall. The Salon boasted a star-studded marquis. Gérôme was awarded the Medal of Honour for his painting *L'Eminence Grise*. He was feted by Parisienne high society. Champagne flowed freely and fois de gras was eagerly gobbled. Manet probably had a solitary beer in a dingy cafe.



The Impressionists included dog portraits in their humble exhibit. Manet chose the Salon for his annual flogging rather than be associated with a rag-tag, flea-bitten troupe descended from that ribald hill in Montmartre.

Manet's *The Railway*, 1873 was accepted into the Salon's show. It was not well received. However, the critics delighted in lampooning Manet. 'Where's da train?' was a common punchline.

Historical moments sprout from humble beginnings.

## Serving it up in the abstract

A major difference between the academic illustrative coloring-in method and the painterly/sculptural process is found in the beginning stage of a painting.

Manet, Degas, Sargent, Velàzquez and Rembrandt, etc., began by first striking the BIG shape and blocking-in the primary dark pattern.



Shown here is a nexample of how John Singer Sargent began a portrait painting. The major building blocks of facial form are his primary, and only, concern.

Being feature centric, articulating the eyes, nose, mouth, etc., is a recipe for sure failure. Beginners tend to paint what they think should be there and not what they see. Unfortunately, the illustrative approach often reinforces this tendency.

Now is a good time to tackle straight-on the pesky issue of Drawing.

Drawing and painting is essentially about shape: how wide, how tall and what are the angles.

The trained artist who can consistently strike shape accurately will always progress faster and more efficiently than an untrained artist wandering from workshop to workshop picking up tidbits of information helter skelter seeking out the secrets of their masters.

I'll be straight here: There are no secrets to be gleaned! There are no secret recipes! No magic brushes!

The beginner's task is simple. Acquire the skill of striking shape!! Dammit all, just do that and everything else will click into place.

Wise words from America's most unpopular art instructor. Many, many apologies but I'm just not the warm and cuddly type licking sugary aphorisms into your ear.



John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Thomas Whittmore*, Black charcoal, 1922



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Portrait of an Egyptian Fellah*, Black chalk, ca. 1856

The beginning artist has a choice to make. There are two different avenues of drawing to pursue; each has its own destination.

Gérôme's drawing is linear: An outline that is supported with minimal tone. His methodology is to work from the outside in. The result is a cooler, temperate piece.

Sargent takes a different tack. His is tone accented with line. His approach is to work from the inside out after first striking the arabesque (the big shape of the head) with a few, succinctly placed lines. The result is more expressive and warmer than Gérôme's.

Frankly, both of these drawings are mediocre. No one consistently works at their best. But they present two divergent paths at a, more or less, level playing field.

The path you choose as a beginner informs the entirety of your career. Yes, that is a heavy burden to carry. Especially when one is inundated with competing pedagogies.

The simple, surest answer is to follow your heart.

The fashionable approach to learning to draw and paint in many art academies is the Charles Bague method. Bague (1827-1883) was a student of Gérôme who compiled a series of drawing exercise plates for Gérôme's students.

It is an effective process in the beginning but is later skewed heavily toward neo-classicism and academicism that was the art in vogue at the time.

Gérôme's classes consistently sold-out. Students clamored and schemed for admittance. A short distance away, as the rat scurries, was the sparsely attended atelier of Corot who managed a one-two punch upon the trajectory of art. First, his landscapes paved the way to Impressionism; second, his figurative paintings had an immense influence on 20th Century art.

As Corot's star ascended, Gérôme's faded.

Sargent studied at Carolus-Duran's atelier. Carolus-Duran emphasized color and form utilizing direct and painterly brushwork heavily informed by Velázquez. This method of painting differed radically from Gérôme's teaching which stressed the coloring-in of the drawing.

Carolus-Duran stressed that one should begin with the half-tones placed within a minimal (better said: economic) armature defining the big shape and block-in of the arabesque. This is what Sargent meant by serving it up in the abstract.

It is painting with a sculptural sensibility, thinking of paint as like pieces of colored clay to be plunked in (spotting color/value notes).

Spotting color/value notes has three criteria: 1. Choose your value; 2. Position it; 3. Shape it with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form.



Charles Bague, *Head of a Young Man*, Oil on Canvas, 1876

Bague was not a stellar painter. Oh me, oh my, I can hear the madding crowd gathering at my derelict doorstep sharpening their pitchforks. How dare I say that!

I am both befuddled and appalled by Bague's outsized influence on artist training today. Not only is it beating upon a dead horse but also a grave disservice.



Following are the primary talking points of painting accredited to John Singer Sargent. Undoubtedly, such thinking would render Gérôme mute with umbrage.

1. Painting is an interpretation of tone. Colour drawn with a brush.
2. Keep the planes free and simple, drawing a full brush down the whole contour of a cheek.
3. Always paint one thing into another and not side by side until they touch.
4. The thicker your paint—the more your color flows.
5. Simplify, omit all but the most essential elements—values, especially the values. You must clarify the values.
6. The secret of painting is in the half tone of each plane, in economizing the accents and in the handling of the lights.
7. You begin with the middle tones and work up from it . . . so that you deal last with your lightest lights and darkest darks, you avoid false accents.
8. Paint in all the half tones and the generalized passages quite thick.
9. It is impossible for a painter to try to repaint a head where the understructure is wrong.



In this 55 minute, [abridged HD video](#) (my students receive the ultra-HD format) from my current workshop, **Gerome vs. Manet**, I demonstrate the initial striking of the arabesque, blocking-in and serving it up in the abstract using only three half-tone values.

This is direct painting stressing that drawing is essentially about shape.

This is also the approach one would take painting an alla prima portrait which is the focus of my upcoming Zoom workshop **Painting the Alla Prima Portrait from Photographs** beginning Tuesday, November 12 at 18:30 PST for two sessions.

# Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn — Self-Portrait at the Age of 63

This Summer past I presented a workshop on Rembrandt's process and materiality where I focused on the abstract structural surface of the head.

The agenda was to break students' ill-learned practice of painting illustratively: That is beginning with a preliminary drawing and studiously coloring it in. Needless to say it was an uphill battle. Few prisoners were taken.

Earlier in this tomb I mentioned that how a beginner is trained informs the entirety of their career. It is a difficult task to wrench oneself free from a restraining culture.

Let me rephrase that sans the sugarcoating: It is easier to be a technician, a technical wizard putting on a visual spectacle, than an artist. Once you know the wizard's tricks, their sleight of hand, the wonderment is lost.

Diametrically opposed to my cantankerous dialectic is the 'self-taught' painter who casts off any idea of technique and craft in a vain pursuit of *sui generis* (originality). There is absolutely nothing new under the sun.

Painting is a visual language whose syntax is built upon and informed by its predecessors. Without Velàzquez there would be no Millet. And no Van Gogh. And no Picasso. And so forth and so on down the line.

Good painting is predicated on a trifecta of technique, expression and construct (the acquired language of painting). Technique alone produces meaningless visual spectacle; expression alone results in banal babble. Construct alone reads as dry as a dictionary.



Serving it up in the abstract using a severely limited palette of four colors (lead white, yellow ochre, indian red, and vine black) to produce three half-tones.

Rembrandt often began with the background (the ground) leaving a reservoir for the figure. The reservoir served as his struck arabesque.

He would loosely block-in the primary dark pattern that would serve as his armature upon which was spotted a rough hewn mosaic of half-tones thus establishing the value structure of his painting.

## Rembrandt's Materiality

Rembrandt constantly strove to push his oil paint into newer realms of expression. Having a vast depth of oil paint's materiality and structure he would manipulate it with extenders to both stabilize the interiority of the paint and its handling properties, i.e., a buttery or plaster-like consistency.

Recent chemical analysis of his paintings has revealed the extender lead carbonate plumb-nacrite (a rare mineral) and a trace of egg yolk in his paint. Van Gogh also used this extender, alas to fugitive effect. His red lead color (minium) is slowly, but surely, fading and will eventually bleach out into white.

The purpose of adding an extender to your oil paint is several fold: first, economical. Until the 1960's professional quality oil paint was much more expensive than today. Adding an extender softens the financial blow;

Second, oil paint dries through oxidization (from the outside in) meaning a skin is formed on the paint layer whilst the interior remains wet. Like a jelly donut. The extender, plus egg yolk (a siccativ), expeditiously dries the paint from the inside out thus creating a much more stable rheological structure;

Third, paint consistency can be adjusted to the task at hand. Some passages require a buttery paint, other passages a stiffer paint for heavy impasto.

In a professional practice, particularly in a cold, damp climate such as the Netherlands, time is money. One cannot be glumly perched in the gloom watching paint dry. Hence, in addition to the extender, artists would use Black oil. This is linseed oil that is heated to almost boiling and a 10% quantity of powdered lead slowly sifted in until a caramel color is achieved.



The Pentimento (derived from the Italian pentirsi: to repent) is the middle stage of the painting process.

Working general to specific the facial forms are built up with thick passages of paint applied with a sculptural sensibility to carve out the forms with a sympathetic concordance of the underlying anatomical structure.

In my experience, black oil is unnecessary. I use calcium carbonate and a drop of egg yolk. That, in addition to my lead white, often results in my paint drying overnight.

With mediums, and other magical concoctions promising wondrous results, less is always more.

A caveat: if you are painting with student grade oil paints do not add an extender. Student grade pigments mimic color with a squirt of dye into chalk. Like bargain basement dish detergent they are a false economy.

In his 1921 publication 'The Materials of the Artists and Their Use in Painting,' Max Doerner postulated that Rembrandt used Venetian Turpentine, an oleo-resin derived then from the cedars of Lebanon. Recent chemical analysis has disproved Doerner.

Sometimes I add a drop of Venetian Turpentine to my mediums. It, too, toughens up the paint and gives it a soft glow. Egg yolk does the same. Don't use Venetian Turpentine and egg yolk together. Nothing good will come of it.

## Diction | Expression

Using extenders in your paint vastly expands your repertoire of expression. Within many a painting the gamut from delicate glazes to bravura strokes of thick paint are within your grasp to fully bring your narrative to life.

As painters we are story tellers. How we tell our stories is of prime import. 'Show me. Don't tell me.'



How we apply paint, our autographic mark making, with brush, knife, fingers, graffito, etc. determines our diction, our expression.

As artists we must strive beyond a simple narrative. The story itself is unimportant. There are no new stories to tell. It is how we tell the story that engages the viewer.

This is where the illustrative, academic approach fails. Technique is important, of course, but it is only the beginning.

Be an artist, not a technician

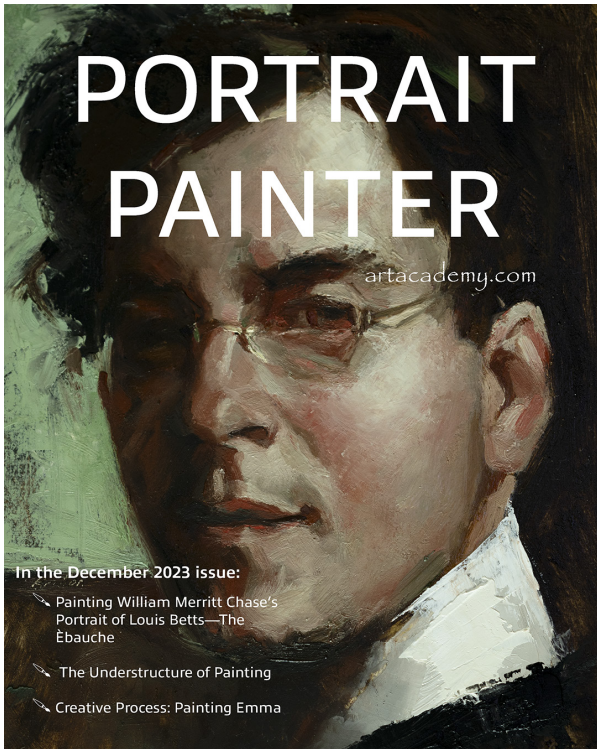
It is our brush work, our autographic mark-making and the abstract structural surface of paint on canvas that is our diction. Like a novelist's word play. And like a novelist we must push beyond mere description and grammar.

This is where the illustrative, academic approach to painting falls flat.

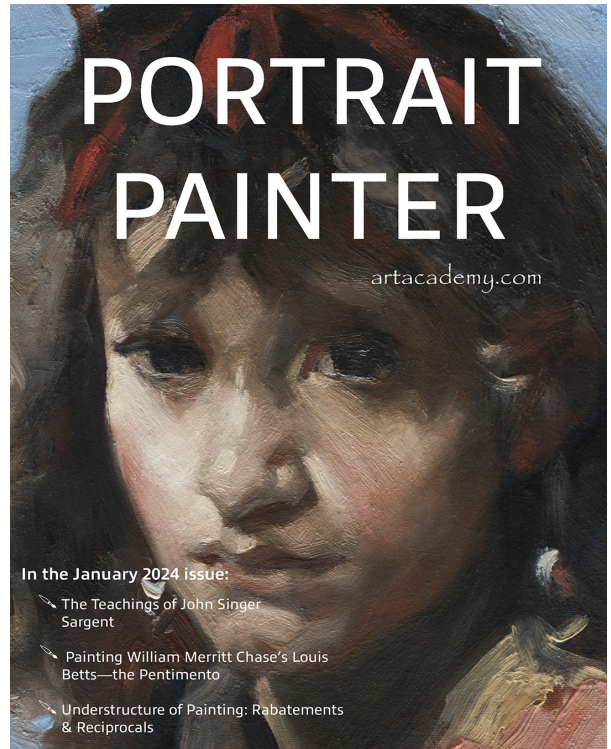
Great writers have their hard-won syntax, painters do too. Within the greatest paintings paint not only defines form but also at the highest levels of painting revel in the play of stochastic fractal recursions—shape repeated in a specific and/or organic pattern defining a whole or process. [Recursion: *see* recursion. A common mathematician's joke.]

All in all, learning to paint is a voyage of discovery of self. It is best approached as a layer cake of acquired knowledge and skill whose foundation rest upon knowing how to draw. Which is essentially about striking specific shape. Everything builds upon that premise.

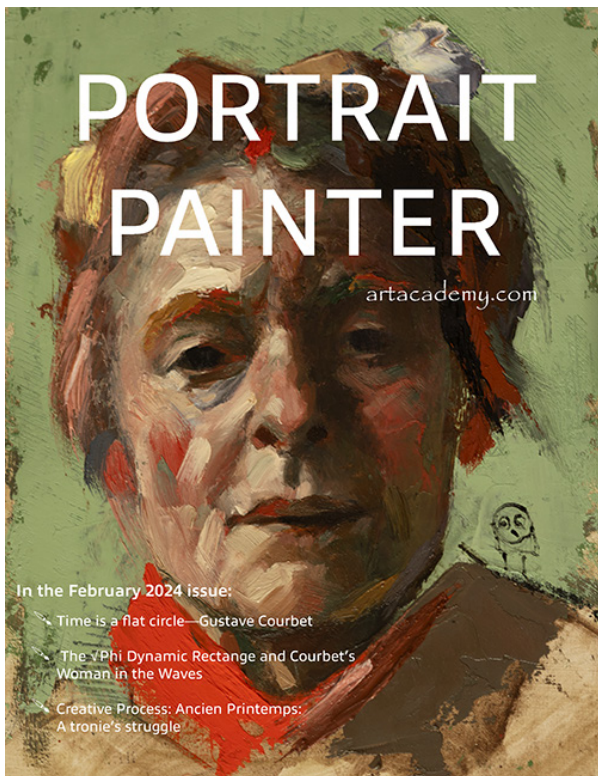
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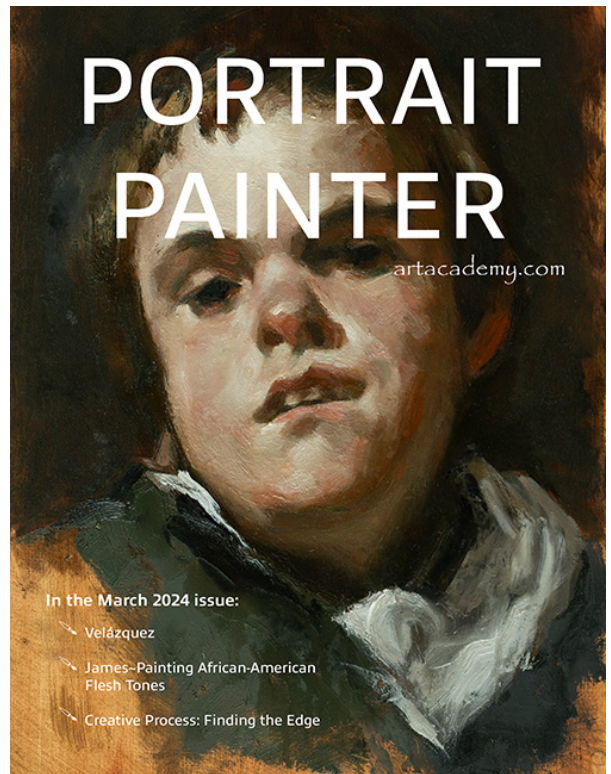
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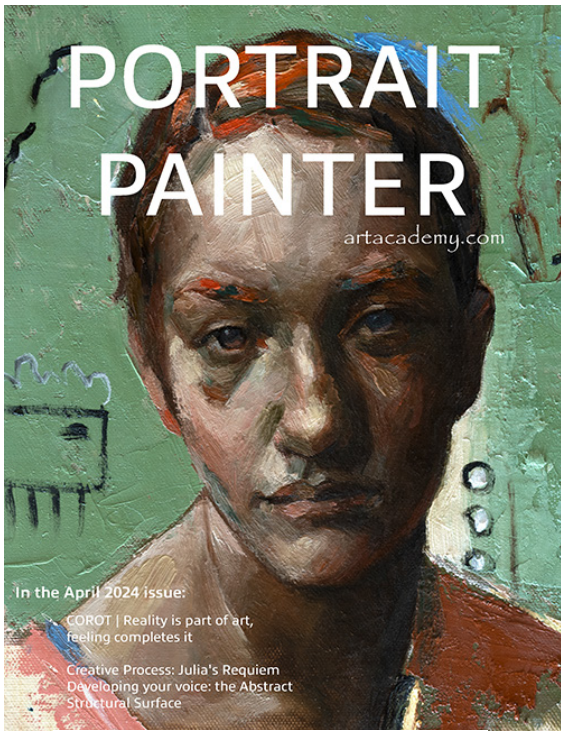
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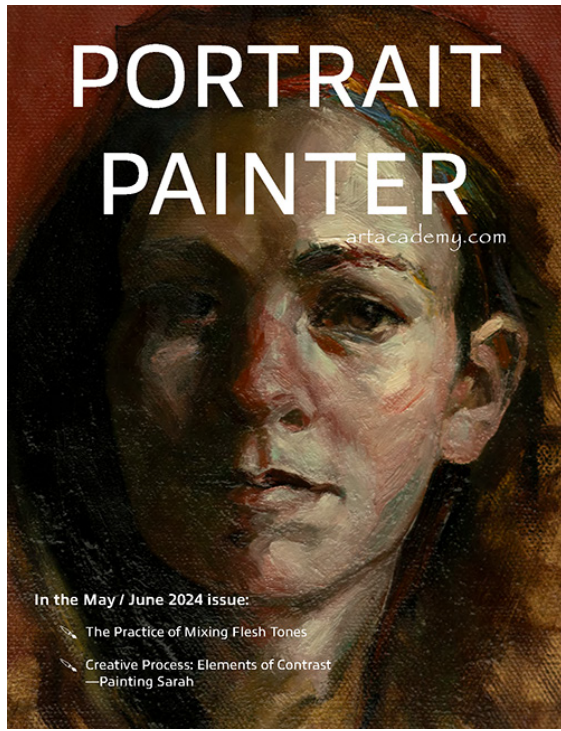
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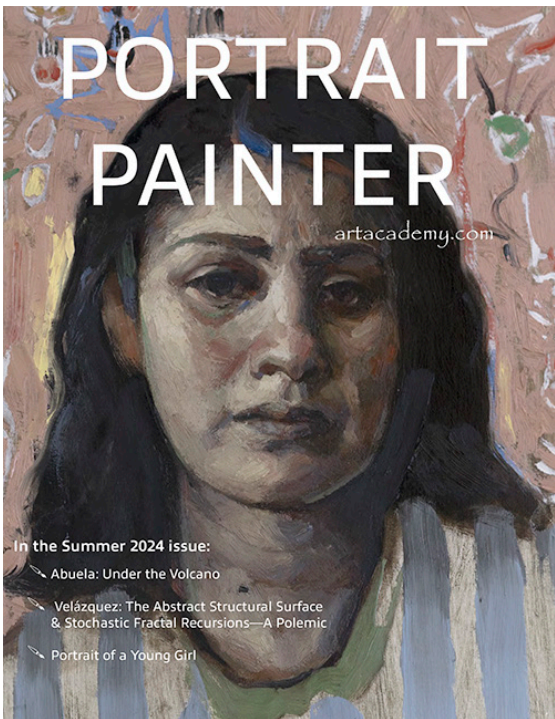
March 2024  
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April 2024  
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May/June 2024  
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Summer 2024  
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