




PORTRAIT PAINTER

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A Word ...

The October 2024 issue of **PORTRAIT PAINTER** features a duel, a scuffle to the death, between Jean-Léon Gérôme and your's truly.

Utilizing Gérôme's *The Bacchante*, 1853 as a foil I deliver a resounding smack of my snot streaked mitten to wipe the smirk off of the face of Classical Realism.

Perchance you might ask why am I prosecuting Gérôme? Gérôme was an affable fellow, I would have enjoyed a frothy beverage or several with him, but he was out-of-step even in his time, the late 19th Century.

It is Gérôme's pedagogy and aesthetic, namely, the Bague method, that today's Academies are predicated.

We live in a time that cries out for giants of painting. Our age of alienation and loneliness is fecund ground for expression. And illustrative, academic painting modes will not cut it.

I might also have hoisted myself with my own petard.



Michael Britton
September 2024

Pushing Boundaries

My upcoming **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, October 15 to November 5, 2024 at 18:30 PST for four sessions. \$320

In addition to the Zoom recording the workshop is filmed in ultra-resolution 4K and edited to 2K.

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



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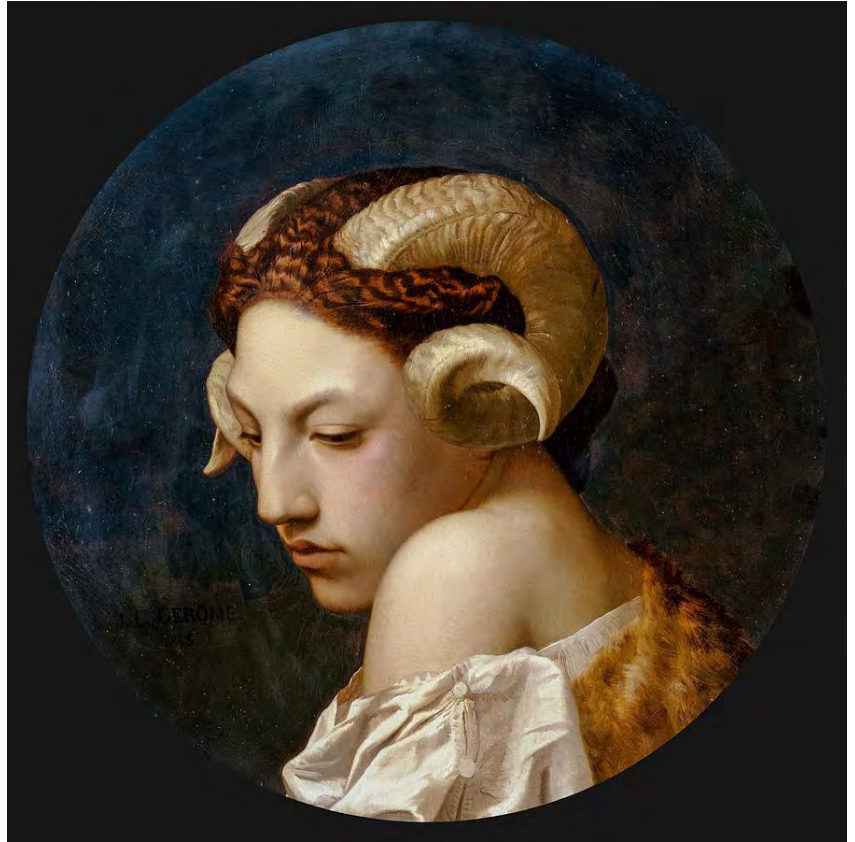
Blame it on Pompeii

The eminent Victorian art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) didn't care much for Rembrandt. Nor Rubens. Nor Caravaggio. Velázquez was somewhat passable to his palate.

Ruskin and fellow confederates disliked the drama and twirlings of Baroque and Rococco art. He preferred a clean line, a return to a time of when men were men—gleefully decapitating one another—and women, nary a whisp of pubic hair to sully their appeal, pranced about sylvan glades starkers, wrapped, at most, in diaphonous robes that excited hairy brutes (men who had yet to be decapitated) to carnal exuberances.

Of course I am referring to Neo-Classicism—the aesthetic that still reverbates in the grand concourses of the wedding cake Ile de France. The over-priced city of Paris sullied by madding crowds chowing down on yesterday's soggy croissants served up by sullen mademoiselles, resentful of having to waken before noon, to trudge to a meaningless, dead-end job for no reason other than that their unemployment benefits had run their happy course.

Less I further digress and ramble on about Jacques Louis David who, a remarkable painter and extremist Jacobin, teamed with his pals Robespierre and Marat, delighted in relieving the French aristocracy of their powdered wigs while still attached to their pampered heads.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Bacchante*, 1853

The apotheosis of Neo-Classicism was David's student, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1780-1867, diminutive in stature and possessed of a high pitched squeal and giggle when delighted.

Ingres was the champion defender, in turn, of Neo-Classicism, Romanticism and Orientalism.

He painted the large tondo (circular) canvas, *The Turkish Bath*, at the tender age of 82.

Despite its wet-dream narrative, *The Turkish Bath* is a marvel of geometry (Euclidian/Dynamic Symmetry) and had a profound influence on Picasso, amongst many others.



Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1862-63

Alas, all things come to an end, they fritter and fray away into nonsensical decadence to be usurped by a rowdy crowd on that far-away hill, Montmartre, who spent their days applying broken color to their canvases and their evenings procuring shady ladies and tipping absinthe. And, on occasion, fishing a despondent Monet out of the Seine.

As insidious as gonorrhoea at a fraternity rager, classicism clung on and refused to exit stage right.

Neo-classicism begat Academicism led by the drumbeat of Jean-Léon Gérôme, one of the three principal instructors at the École des Beaux Arts.

Despite, perhaps because of, the restrictive curriculum of Gérôme's atelier new students were hazed in a riotous bedlam of dueling naked on the model's dais, slashing one another with loaded paint brushes, tossing the hapless out of windows and down stairs, amongst other high-spirited hijinks that, today, would immediately have your paint-smearred butt kicked to the curb to await the arrival of the cops. We are a dour lot now.

Gérôme was at odds with Impressionism whose star ascended while his plummeted like a cherub shot out of the sky like a partridge destined for a dinner table.

Gérôme's painting *The Snake Charmer*, 1879, a wholly ludicrous narrative presenting a nude adolescent boy entwined by, I guess, a large boa constrictor. A common enough sight these days on Venice Beach or the boardwalk in Atlantic City. *The Snake Charmer* sold for \$19,500 in 1888. A handsome fistful of treasury at the time! Alas, in 1942, the painting sold for a lousy \$500. His prices have recovered in the last decade or so, commanding about £2 million.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, 1879

Time, perchance, to hustle this narrative along.

As artists we have stories to tell. How we tell our stories is as important, arguably more so, than the stories themselves. And, of course, we come to that old hoary dictum: show me, don't tell me.

Academic, or classical realism, is predicated on drawing to tell their narratives. That is one avenue an artist can pursue, however, one is fully reliant on the narrative. Of course, the beginning artist is usually impressed by the technical facility of a well-executed academic painting, but once the magician's tricks are learned and the skills acquired the wonderment is tarnished.

And then there is the issue of memes in a constantly shifting moral/cultural mileau. The Orientalist themes of Gérôme are tainted. Since his paintings rely wholly on the narrative they cannot escape the taint of racism and misogynerie—a loaded issue. Does exotic equate racism whatever the intention?

Ingres was in the same suspect Orientalist camp. The genius of his compositions and geometry has reprieved him from today's cat-o-nine-tails. The Impressionist painter/sculptor Edgar Degas was an unrepentant misogynist and anti-semitic yet his works are somehow forgiven.

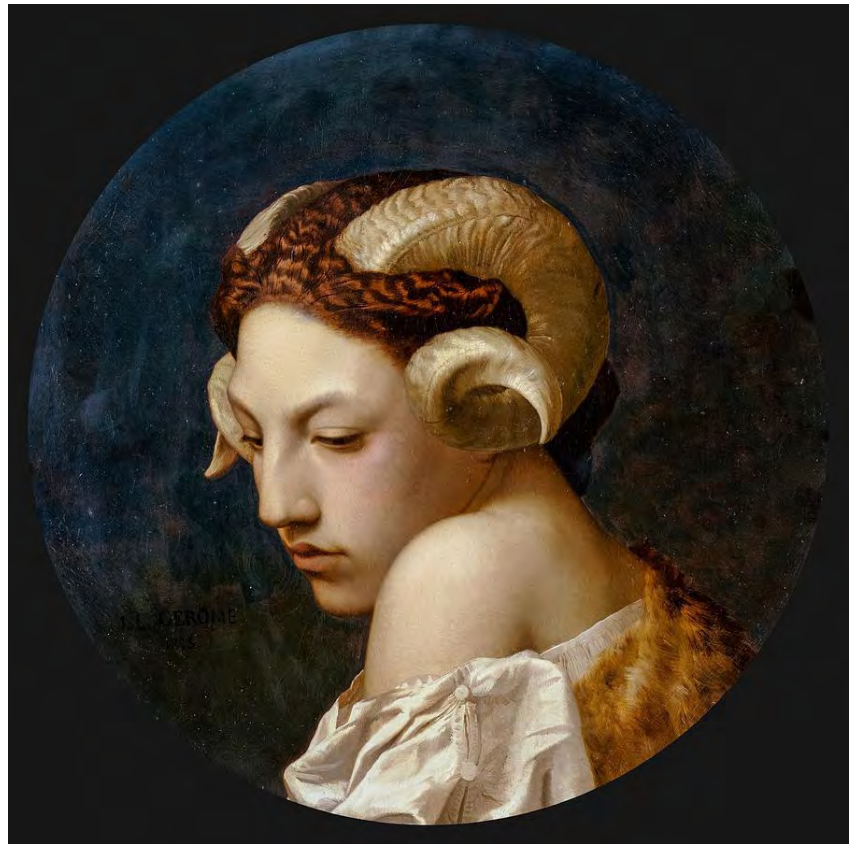
My preferred avenue is the painterly. Of course, drawing is critical. Not having that basic skill is a serious obstacle to creating convincing and engaging narratives.

But drawing is only one facet. Whereas Classical Realism is at root colored-in drawing—Forsooth! I can already hear the howls of indignant outrage—vis-a-vis finely rendered form construction. Painting revels in the exuberant materiality of the paint.

Well, then, let's take this sentiment to task using Gérôme's *The Bacchante*, 1853 as a foil.

A bacchante is/was a disciple of Bacchus/Dionysius, the Roman/Greek god of good times and ribald Saturday nights. Bacchantes, the raving ones, were the original party girls possessed of a rather dark side. Their idea of a good time was to rampage through meadows and forests savaging sundry furry creatures and the occasional hapless fellow found lurking on the periphery of playgrounds.

Gérôme's bacchante is demure and dolled-up for a debutante evening of waltzing and polite chit-chat. A fellow could be forgiven for thinking her shy and unsullied, incapable of ripping out his testicles.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Bacchante*, 1853

Gérôme's treatment of her drapery is masterful. So, too, the horns. 'Tis well-wrought nonsense. One could protest that it was the timbre of the times. However this was also the time when Courbet was raising a ruckus and scandalizing delicate sensibilities with his paintings of robust women with dirty feet. ... and ... the horror! the horror! ... pubic hair.

Essentially, Gérôme's Bacchante is a finely colored drawing. It is illustrative.

With some exceptions most academies focus largely on drawing and rendering form. A preparatory drawing is painstakingly developed, transferred onto the canvas and, perhaps, a grisaille to fix the tonal values before proceeding to color it in.

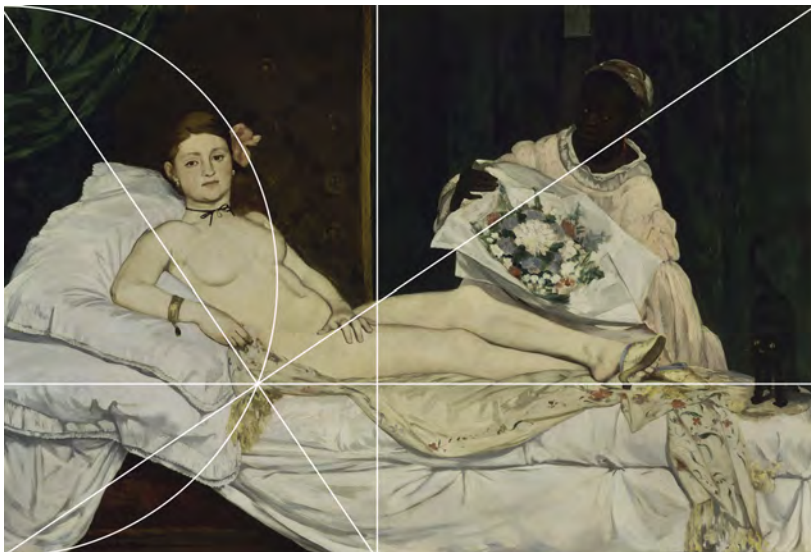
But this is only a part of the Classical painting process. Underlying paintings is a matrix of geometry derived from the Golden Number 1.618. Plato ascribed this irregular number as being the number of the world soul. Essentially, the geometrical matrix proffers a direct conduit to the viewer's unconscious mind. It is the sales pitch whose hook hoists you by the petard and engages. Herein lay the power of images.

Despite the hi-falutin' terminology often employed—sacred geometry, secret geometry, dynamic, symphonic composition—it is good ole Euclidian extrapolations of a ruler and compass. For painting's purposes Euclidian geometry is basically an erector set of intersection points.



Gérôme's Bacchante is a tondo (circular canvas) which is drawn from the square. Within the square the primary diagonals are rendered and two overlapping arcs inscribed.

B and C are established at the intersections of their respective diagonals and arcs. A is the centerpoint of the circle encompassing our lovely maenad's head.



There is more to this canvas' geometry than that I have shown, but it is intended as a starting point. Bear in mind that simple in and of itself is meaningless. However, a simplicity arrived at through a wall of complexity ... well, then you got something.

An underlying geometry is not unique to classical realism. Édouard Manet also used it as shown here in *Olympia*, 1883. A painting that wholly scandalized Paris. Manet flipped the script on the meme that presented women for centuries. How dare a prostitute shamelessly challenge the male gaze.

Let's hustle this dog and pony show along ...

As previously slandered, Gérôme was essentially an academic illustrator. My intent is to take Gérôme's *Bacchante* and rework it. I want to re-tell the story in a more contemporary, painterly mode. And isn't art, painting, literature, music, really a re-telling of ancient stories? The stories remain the same, the characters differ.

My panel (canvas) is 11.75" x 15.666"—Aha! You might decry! The sneaky bastard snuck in lucky old 666—which is a classical proportion of 1.3333. A favorite of Titian.

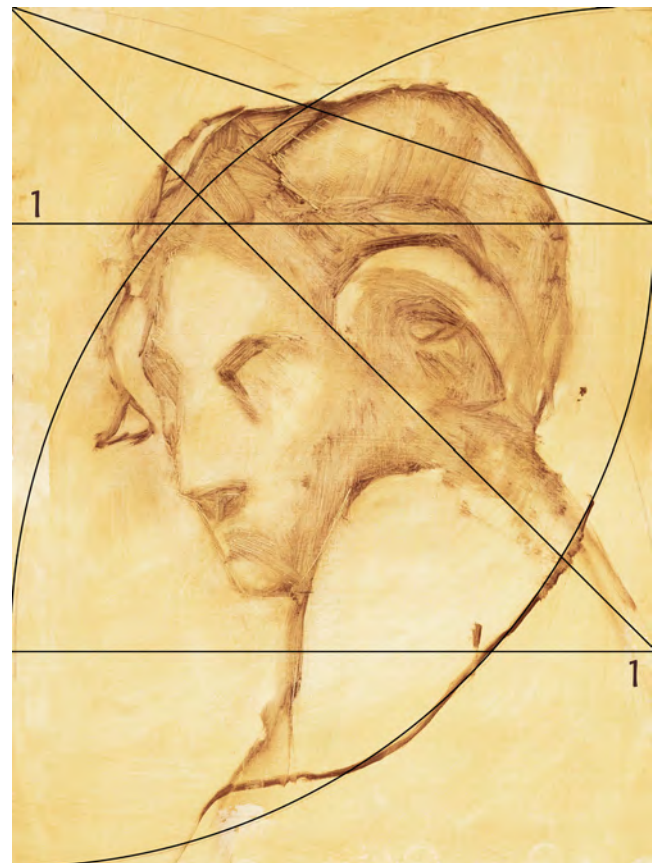
This is a head study for which a succinct geometry works best. I first established my two rabatements (1) which is applying overlapping squares and from there two arcs.

A couple of diagonals affix the head to its compositional placement. From here on in my gut instinct takes over.

I forego a preliminary drawing because it can enslave you. If you can draw with a pencil, you can with some effort, of course, draw with the brush which is manifoldly more liberating.

Drawing is essentially about striking shape: both the big shape (the arabesque ... oh, I know, I know ... everyone else calls it the contour, mapping in, ad nauseum ... how dull! ... arabesque denotes rhythm. Terminology implies intent! ... let's move on) and the small shapes that construct the interiority of the face. The what?! Speak English! Well, it's like a jigsaw puzzle. Fitting all of the pieces together into a cohesive whole.

The overall light/dark pattern, too, is two interlocking shapes. Keep it simple. Keep it elegant. Less is more.



Speaking of simple, speaking of elegant, the human head subscribes more or less to two rectangles and the square.

The profile and 7/8's view often subscribe to a square. Gérôme's Bacchante very closely approximates the square. You'll find, too, that the proportion from the base of the chin (the mental protuberance) to the brow line (the frontal orbital eminence) equals the width of the face from the condyle (where the earlobe meets the jaw) to the lateral edge of the Masseter (the large, flat chewing muscle). There are variances, of course, the Universe does not surrender it's secrets readily.

The frontal view often corresponds to either the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (the square root of the Golden rectangle) or the truncated $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle. These are dynamic rectangles which are the font of Western civilization.

Learn to strike these two rectangles and you are well on your way to mastering portrait drawing. After all, drawing is essentially how wide, how tall, and what are the angles.

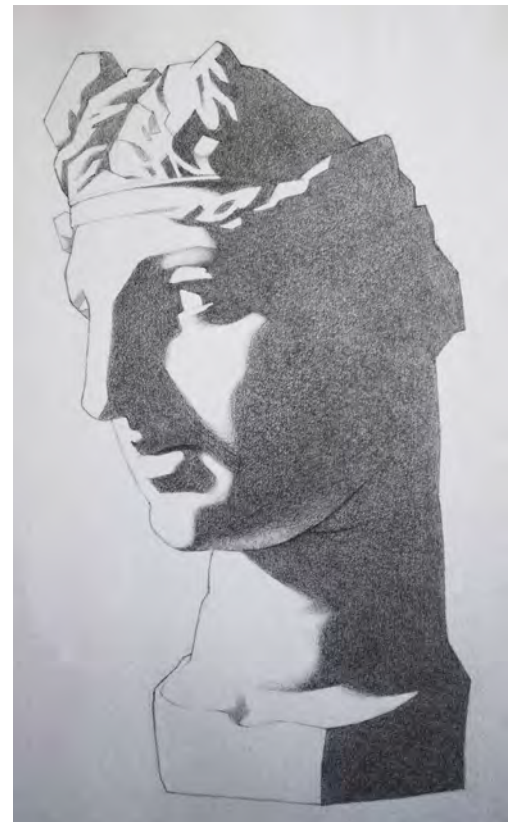
The other path is the 3-part Bague drawing plates which are very effective. However, expect to spend a year on each part to work your way through them.

Charles Bague was a student of Gérôme's and the Bague system was developed in collaboration with Gérôme. My beef with the Bague system is that it is infused with mid-19th century Second Empire classicism and that aesthetic will infect you as surely as a randy romp in a Bangkok brothel. A stroll through the Luxembourg or Tuleries Gardens proves my stance. Paris is replete with banal, soul suffocating Second Empire statuary. Why the hell would you want to be influenced by that! You would not write like a 19th Century, second-rate novelist, why would you want to paint like that!

Small wonder that I am not a popular guy with the Academies.



Often the frontal view of the human head subscribes to either the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (illustrated here) or truncated $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles. There will be small variances, of course, but mastering these two rectangles establishes a sound foundation.



Charles Bague drawing plate.

Serve it up in the abstract!

That was the war cry of John Singer Sargent. Do not be feature centric. Look past the features and into the basic building blocks of the head.

There is a small park in Montmartre, Paris that is chock-a-bloc with scores of portrait artists hustling Euros from bewildered tourists.

With very rare exceptions they all begin with an eye and grow out the portrait like a toe fungus. Little wonder that a likeness cannot be rendered.

As a young man desirous of Euros to jingle my penurious wallet I figured I could show those licensed sketchers a thing or two.

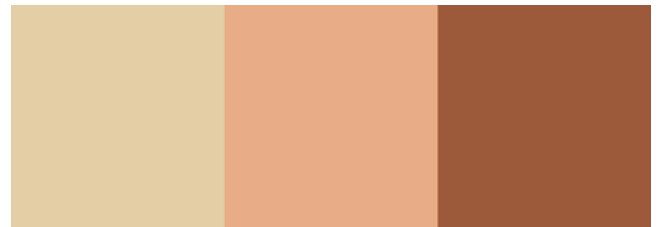
I set up shop a few metres from Place du Tertre. Who needs a license to paint in Paris? I don't need no stinkin' license! Surely my skill and facility with the brush would enthrall my fellow Parisienne artists. Surely they would be forever grateful for my showing them the true path to portraiture.

They were not grateful. They were not enthralled.

Nor were the police.

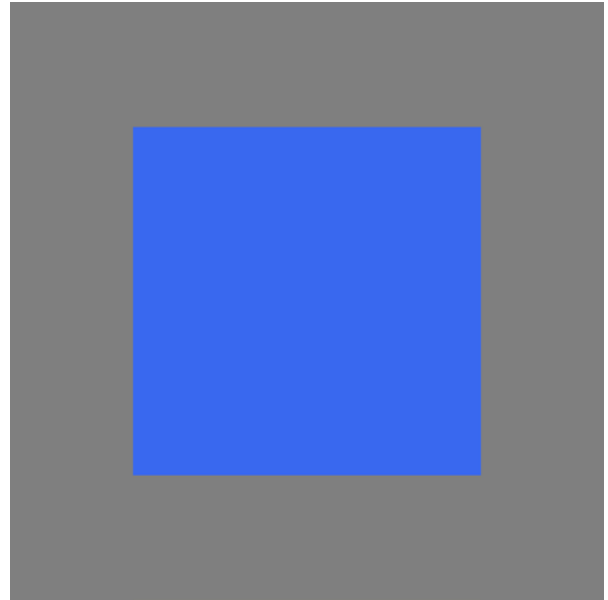
Once the initial striking of the arabesque and primary light/dark pattern is fixed I embark on the half-tones. My palette is limited to only four colors: flake white, yellow ochre pale, indian red and vine black from which I mix three half-tones that are bulked up with calcium carbonate.

I paint like a sculptor. My dark half-tone is applied thinly. My light half-tone heavier as if it were colored clay. I treat my brush like a sculptor's trowel building up the facial forms with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical structure.



The background (aka ground), too, must be given due consideration. Color is interactive and the effect of simultaneous contrast plays a large role not only in visual effect but also the expressive/emotional.

In short, a color will push its neighbor toward its complement. i.e., a blue square within a gray square will push it subtly toward orange. Let your eyes fall out of focus, into soft eye, and the orange shift will be more apparent.



The green ground shifts my half tones toward red. Alas, this is not the direction I want to go. Unlike Gérôme I seek out a sickly bacchante. A somewhat despondent, lonely outlier. Like me.

Pretty people do not interest me. Perhaps it is because they float through life on a smile. And their narratives and tragedies strike me as trite.

In this first pass of the *Pentimento* (derived from the Italian *pentirsi*: to repent) both the figure and narrative are further developed. The now yellow ground pushes the flesh tones toward violet.

I figure my bacchante would have a tattoo, a pagan, jailhouse tattoo. And a snake. Yeah. She would like snakes.



In this second pass of the Pentimento my narrative gels.

Given the subject, a raving beast of a woman, albeit one given to bouts of melancholia, it would be nonsensical to render her with delicate flesh tones as Gérôme has done.

My brush work, my abstract structural surface, is rougher. I paint with the brush, the knife, my fingers and even knit planar forms by cross-hatching with my ever-trusty measuring stick.

Some changes were made to the drawing aspects. Gérôme's bacchante's eyes feel too narrowly set. Slightly spacing her eyes further apart renders a more animal quality. Although they still don't feel right.



Below her shoulder, her upper torso, gave me serious pause. I was determined not to go Gérôme's route with a delicate blouse. Mind you, that blouse is excellent for studying drapery. Gérôme was an absolute master of drapery.

And thus I was stumped. Stymied. Perhaps I could have depicted her nude, but that would weaken my narrative. Perhaps I could have left well enough alone, but that, too, would weaken my narrative.

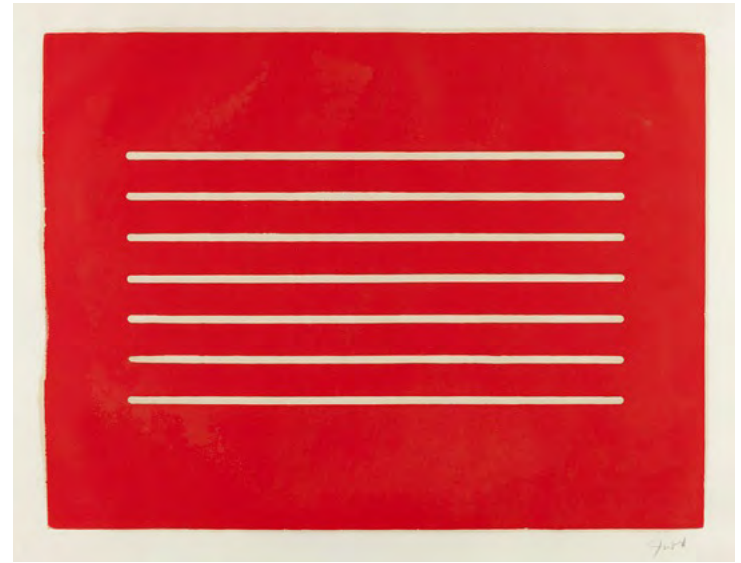
Perhaps my bacchante would have a misanthropic streak. Perhaps she would skin hapless fellas alive and drape herself with their hide. My bacchante would do that. I am sure of it. And so she did.

Of all the elements of painting—drawing, notan, composition, the abstract structural surface, fractality—Unity is paramount. To that end I tinted my yellow ground and like a small child idly ripping the wings off of flies, something my bacchante would do, I played with painterly ideas riffing through my unconscious mind. In retrospect, this riffing of the florescent pink strokes was somehow informed by the early paintings of the Minimalist painter Donald Judd. A painter whom I admired in my troubled youth.

As an artist you must look at paintings of all genres. Many you will readily dismiss. But as your awareness and appreciation grows you will recognize the shared, intrinsic qualities of good art. The important thing is to build up your lexicon of imagery.

And through this acquired lexicon your work will deepen in meanings.

An artist grows and explores new vistas. A technician merely refines.



Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1961

This deceptively simple image's hypnotic quality is, in part, due to its dynamic rectangle. Judd served as an engineer in the US Army (1946-47). I recognize it as coming pretty darn close to the complementary shape of the $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle—like color, shape, too, has its complementaries. But it is more complex than that. Judd sought autonomy and clarity for the constructed object and the space created by it.

As an artist it is imperative to move away from the 'brown soup' backgrounds of academic painting. Other than a starting point for beginners to acquire an understanding of chiaroscuro effect, 'brown soup' is intellectual sloth.

My, my, haven't I worked myself up into a tizzy.

Let me sum up this preachy sermon: acquire a storehouse of imagery from which you can grasp a lexeme and run and play with it. Play with it as a child would. Children are natural artists. They can make something out of anything.

Oh! And one more thing before I move on: Whereas it is absolutely critical to acquire your foundational skillset of drawing, anatomy, color, etc., bear in mind that the academies are pumping out thousands of competent graduates every year. As an artist you must have that 'extra' which is your own unique voice. Voice is distinct from style. Style is shallow and immediately seen as such. A powerful voice layered with meaning is what defines you as an artist. Frighten the bejesus out of yourself now and then. It's good for you.

Let's return now to our regularly scheduled programming ...

As a male artist whose genre is the figural, particularly the portrait, I tread on quicksand. I am keenly aware of the sub-jugative implications of the male gaze on the female form.

This is where I take serious issue particularly with Bougeureau, the darling of far too many academies. Frankly, William-Adolphe Bougeureau (1825-1905) was a soft por-nographer whose work is highly polished treacle.

He was a coeval of Gérôme, albeit a year younger, and both studied at the École des Beaux Arts at roughly the same time, 1844-46. Both were celebrated salon artists. Both were feted by high society while the likes of Manet and De-gas were treated as lepers.



Bougeureau, *Before the Bath*, 1900

Compare Degas' rough, even crude, rendering of prostitutes with Bougeureau's sexually charged adolescent and it is immediately apparent which work is more powerful, more empathetic.

Additionally, Degas' lithograph was created 33 years before Bougeureau's banal, pedophilic fantasy.

Art is political. It always has been.



Edgar Degas, *The Brothel*, 1867

Classicism and Academicism has a history of elevating the courtesan to the ideal of goddesses and nymphs. There was also a practicality here. Most models supplemented their incomes with prostitution. They had no choice in the matter. The 14 years old model for Degas' sculpture of the little ballerina was a well-known street prostitute. So, too, were many of the angels in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Much to the consternation of Pope Julius II and his retinue of Cardinals who recognized them. If you were a student of Thomas Eakins you would, sooner or later, be assigned to trawling the mean streets of Philadelphia to barter for a model for that day's class.

Hollywood, too, was in on this game of the idealized fallen woman as a goddess with a heart of gold. I'm thinking here of Miss Kitty, the brothel owner from the long running Bonanza television series that delighted many of our grandparents on Saturday nights.

The reality was depressingly grim. Isolated, destitute and sick over 60% of prostitutes in the American frontier committed suicide. It was unspeakably worse for Chinese prostitutes pressed into subterranean servitude and violence.

This is the dreary baggage that I confront which brings us to the muddy bank of the Rubicon.

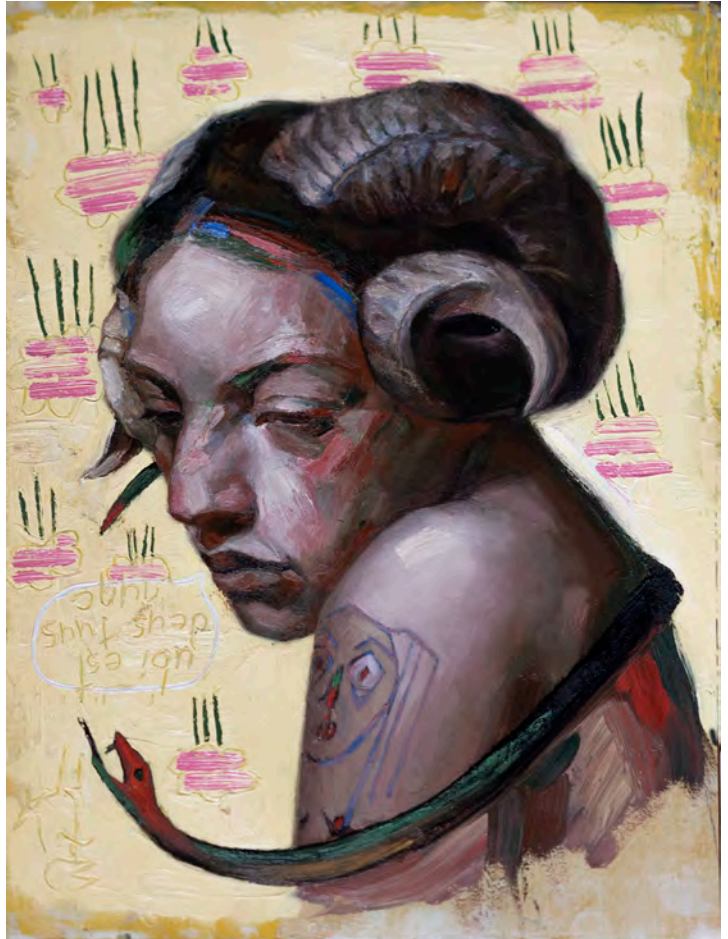
As a painting progresses the narrative will take unexpected twists and turns. My bacchante's rage is turned inward. I desire to go beyond a comic-book narrative of a 'bad' woman which is where I fear a classical, academic approach will lead me.

I do not see how self-loathing and loneliness can be expressed illustratively without crumbling into maudlin cliché. It is here that the road ends for illustrative classicism. Perhaps I am wrong. I am wary of absolutes.

It is through the materiality of paint that I seek my expression and narrative. My brushwork grew rougher, at times the paint was literally slashed on and pushed and pulled with my palette knife and flattened with my fingers.

In both my painting practice and teaching I stress the painterly/sculptural process as if modeling the head in clay. Here I've gone further, moving from working my paint as if it were colored clay to something more akin to wood carving. Like carving a mask for a pagan ritual.

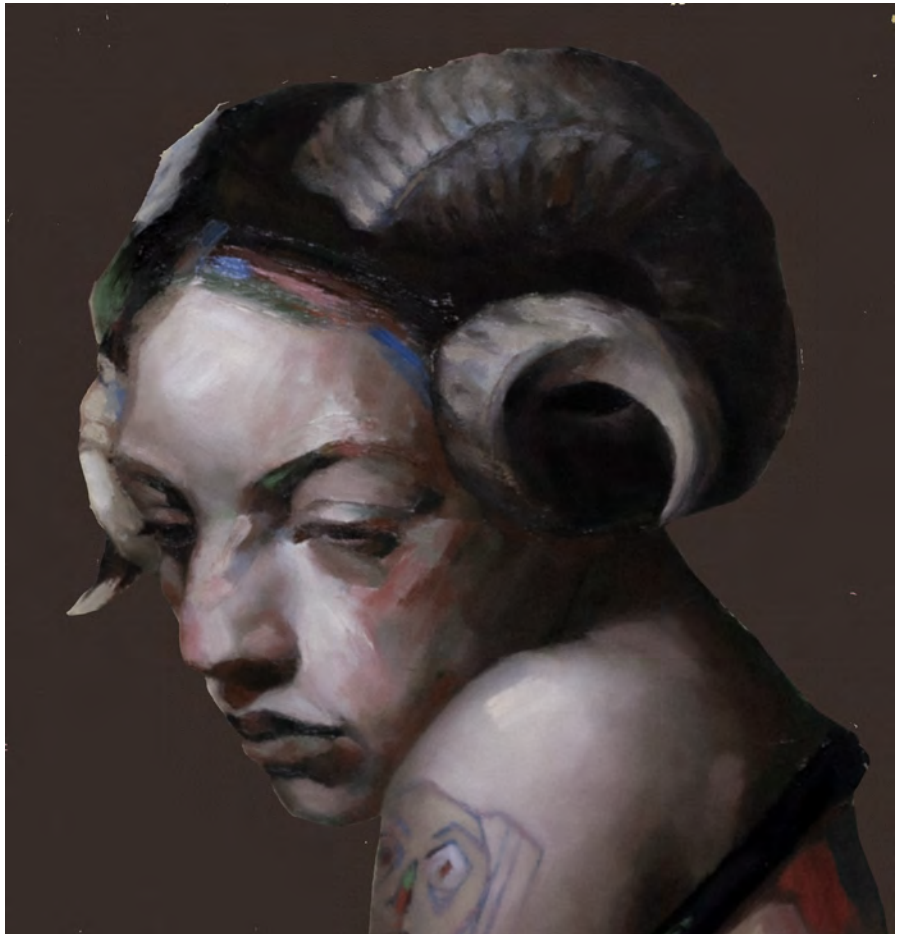
I am striving for a horrific beauty—a beauty not of physical form but a beauty of paint as paint.



I had a hell of a time with it. Admittedly I endured an anguished ambivalence with this painting—building up paint and scraping it out, an additive/subtractive process—striving for an expression that stubbornly hovered outside my grasp.

No matter how crude, how roughly rendered an image it will always testify to whether or not an artist can draw. 90% of painting problems are drawing issues.

It is important to constantly step back from your painting to assess and re-assess. Perception is an incidious infection. We see what we want to see.



I use a mirror to reverse and view my painting with a fresh set of eyes. The mirror is a merciless critic. There's no sugar coating. Errors will immediately pop out.

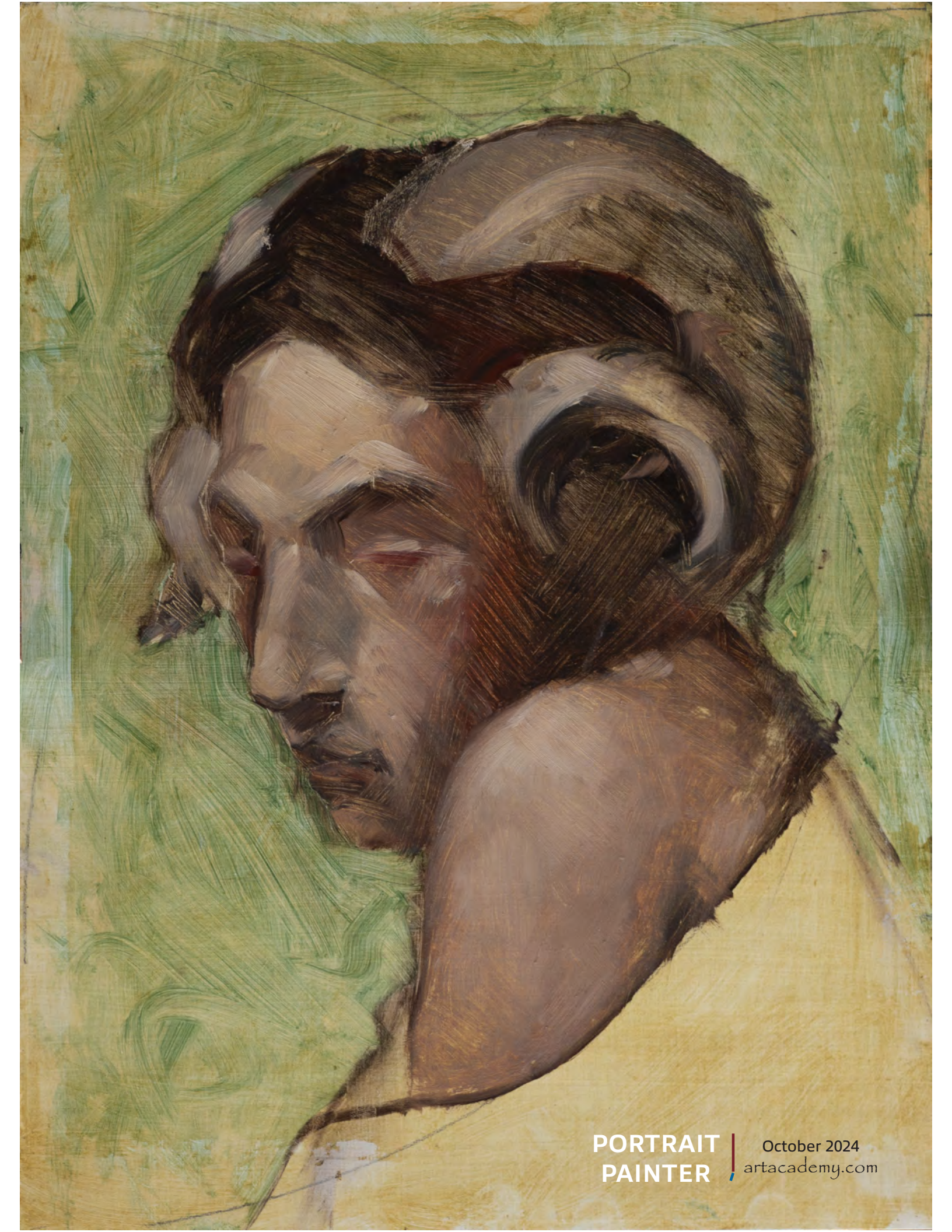
Using Photoshop I softened the brush strokes, tamped down my abstract structural surface, to assess the overall structure of the head and to mimic the illustrative mode of Classical Realism. And because I'm, at heart, a nice guy I replaced the background with brown soup—a level playing field with Gérôme. I choose Gérôme as my foil because it is his pedagogy, to wit, the Barge method, that the Academies are predicated.

My Photoshopped Bacchante is less jarring. Less savage, more appealing. But the narrative is weakened. It has become palaver buoyed by my craft. If I were content to be merely a technician I would go this route. But I am an artist. Essentially it boils down to subjective timbre.



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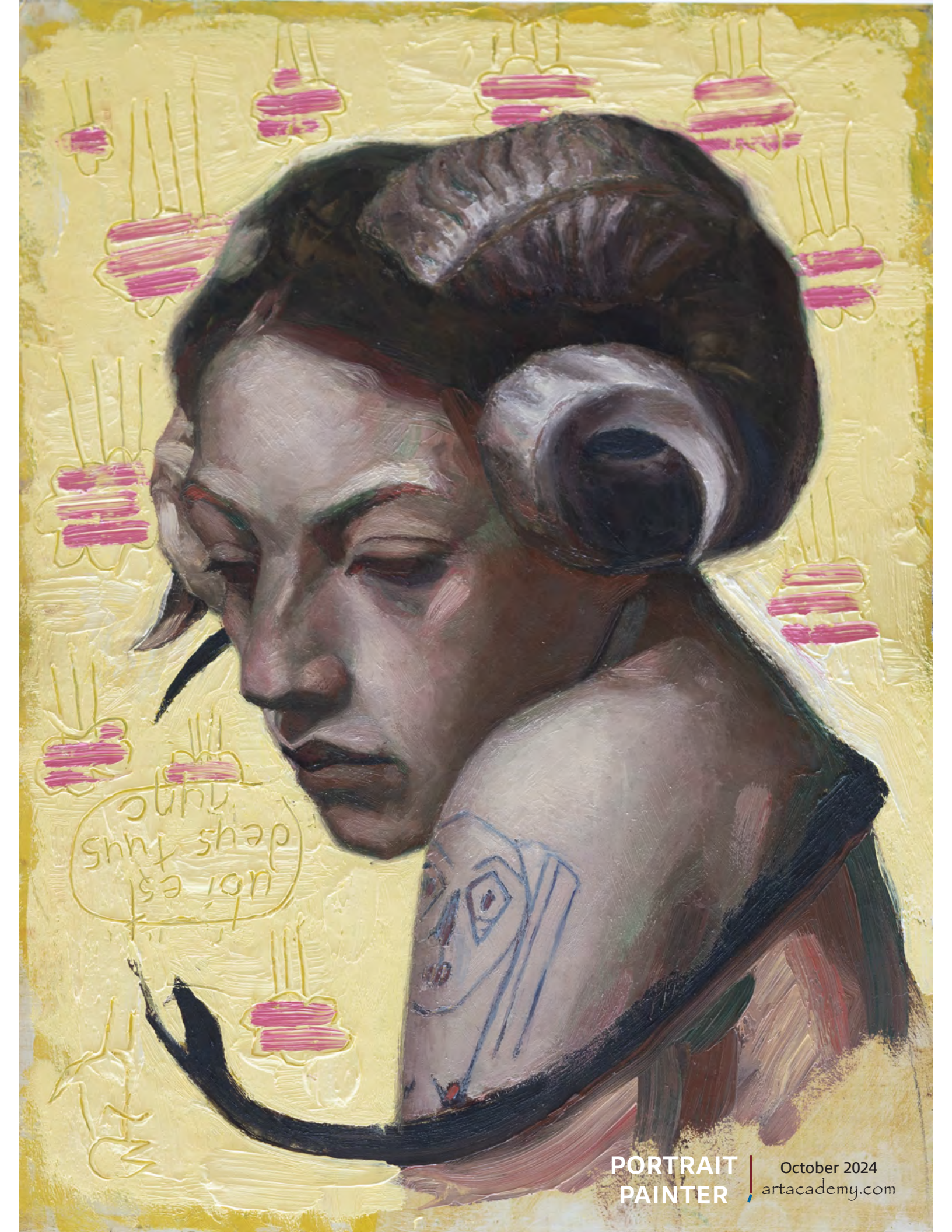
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The Practice of Spotting Color/Value Notes

Johannes Vermeer — The Milkmaid, c. 1657-8

'Milkmaid' is a bit of a misnomer. It is a sanitizing title appealing to our delicate, contemporary sensibilities. Like Frans Hal's 'Gypsy Girl' who, frankly, was no gypsy but a woman of much ill-repute who plied her syphilitic trade in the darker corners of Haarlem's seediest taverns.

Vermeer's milkmaid was actually a kitchen maid. An occupation said to attract a certain kind of woman brimming with an overt and, reputedly, very willing sexuality. Alas, boys will be boys.



Look closely at Vermeer's demure kitchen worker and you'll see a thick-waisted woman with powerful forearms and a no-nonsense countenance whom, I imagine, could readily whup the bejesus out of Vermeer should he attempt any hanky-panky beneath the dinner rolls.

Despite the grave risk, carnal ambitions lurked in the dark chambers of Vermeer's nocturnal dreams.

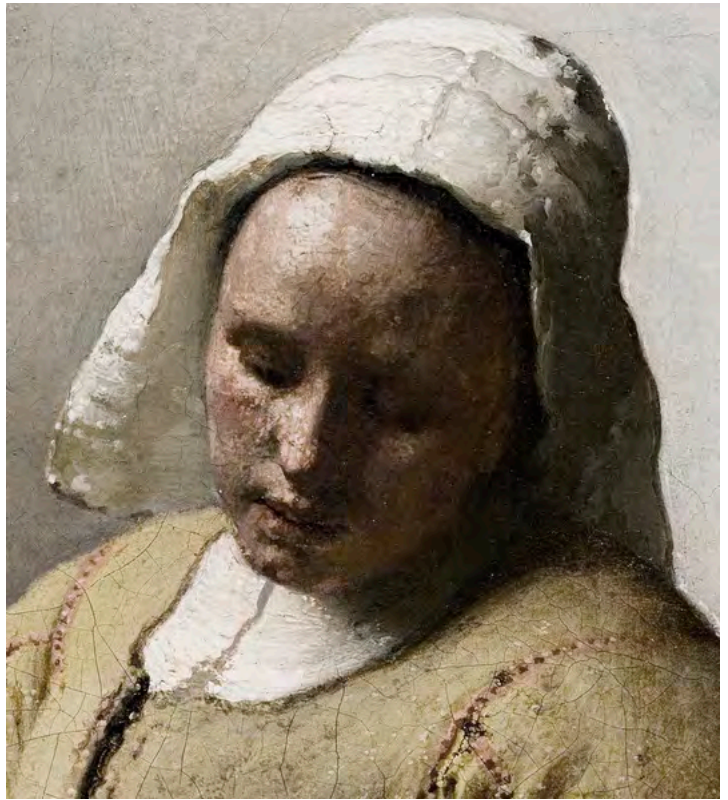
Perfidy! you might cry. But take a look at the tiles lining the kitchen floor next to the foot warmer. By Jove! Cupid is prancing about with a most decidedly randy intent.

Less a self-appointed Robespierre seek to cancel Vermeer, it bears reminding that we are all painters of our time. And it's a pretty dicey gamble as to what side of history we will fall.

The Milkmaid is a small painting. A mere 17 7/8" X 16 1/8" (45.4 x 41 cm).

Our focus is on the head of the milkmaid. The original head barely approximates 2" and, yet, at this diminutive scale Vermeer has solidly rendered the head vis-a-vis spotting color/value notes.

Spotting color/value notes invokes three rules of practice: first, select your color/value (hue); second, position it via vertical



and horizontal plumb lines (as you gain experience you will acquire the skill of accurately 'eyeballing' placement; third, shaping the note with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical form.

I forego the preliminary drawing and plunge right in with a loaded brush and serve up the ébauche in the abstract. Just as John Singer Sargent taught and painted.

Serving it up in the abstract entails looking past the features and deeper into the large building blocks of form with the eyes of a sculptor.

Don't paint tight less your drawing enslave you and enchain your soul within the dark recess of illustration.

Painting is an asymptotic process of working very general to specific. Like a sculptor modeling in clay we are engaged in an additive/subtractive practice of applying paint and pushing it around. Often scraping out errant passages too.

Sure, it looks ugly at this beginning stage. Birthing and creative process are messy. Many artists believe that the painting should be beautiful from the outset. I'm not one of them.

My practice is to paint rough. Even coarsely. I use a 60cm extra-long handled filbert (Escoda #20). It allows me to stand back a good distance from the easel, an advantageous station-point to accurately gauge shape and proportion.



Again, think like a sculptor slapping on hands full o' clay and tearing it away to build up the foundation upon an armature. The painter's armature is the struck arabesque.

Your *ébauche* should be darker and warmer than what your final intent will be. Begin too light and you'll chalk out. Lay in your darks too heavy and thick and you'll be irretrievably boxed into a corner from which there is little chance of escape.

I endorse a very limited palette for the *ébauche*: lead white, yellow ochre, indian red and vine, or ivory, black. For the milkmaid's chemise I used lead tin yellow tempered with yellow ochre.

Only three values were employed for the half-tones of the head. A darkish light, a warm-gray middle light and a warm dark light. Ignore the features. They will not help you. Resist the features' beckoning you to come hither and, like a mermaid, lure your painting to a quick demise. Don't be feature centric!

The Pentimento follows the ébauche.

Using an expanded palette of nine colors I proceed to spot in the color/value notes. Still thinking like a sculptor and plugging color as if they were pieces of colored clay.

At this still-early stage my color/value notes are about the size of a coin. Varying from a dime to a 25¢ piece.

Before embarking on the pentimento it is well-advised to check all of your measures. I use a wooden stylus to scratch in pin-pricks as guide posts.

Always bear in mind Sargent's advice to his students: spend a week or so foregoing the features, look past them and you'll learn something about modeling the head three-dimensionally. Admittedly I expanded upon his original statement.



More often than not beginners lose sight of the forest for the trees. It is important to constantly step back from your painting to assess, and re-assess, the overall value/tonal structure.

An exercise I give my students in my Mastering Flesh Tones workshop is the 'flesh ball'. Yep, there's no sugar coating this one.

Imagine the Milkmaid's head as a ball o' flesh without the nooks and crannies of the features.

With each successive passage the color/value notes are refined. Temperature also comes into play. Warm notes juxtaposed to cool notes.

Edging also comes into play. I find the common term 'blending' particularly maladorous. Blending is destructive of form; it is the realm of the timid painter.

I knit the form edges together employing a variety of means: cross-hatching with either a dry brush, a brush handle (Baroque painters used to sharpen their brush handles for this task.), and for finer edges a wood stylus. I will not hesitate to use my fingers either.

Edging is as important as the brush stroke. The practice of knitting the forms is a constructive technique of



rendering simultaneous structure and cohesiveness.

More often than not the beginning artist feels compelled to articulate the eyes much to the detriment of the painting. Don't! Just don't! Inference is a much more powerful narrative than a clumsy exaggeration that both flattens the portrait and destroys all plausibility. Don't belittle the viewer's intelligence.

The early to mid-twentieth century American painter, Charles Hawthorne, limited his students' painting tools to a plasterer's trowel. That clumsy instrument immediately confined and liberated his students to serving it up in the abstract. And, indeed, the sculptural.

With a gratuitous nod to Hawthorne's 'mud faces' albeit with a painting knife and sans plasterer's trowel, I pushed and pulled the paint as if it were colored clay.

My primary consideration is the development of facial form—as if I was painting a still life.

The two fundamentals of painting are in the broad shapes and effect achieved through juxtaposition of the large color areas against one another. The best painters paint in planes not colored-in outlines.



Pushing Boundaries

My upcoming **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, October 15 to November 5, 2024 at 18:30 PST for four sessions. \$320

Using Jean-Léon Gérôme's tondo (a circular canvas) *Portrait of a Child* as a foil we begin with striking the arabesque, fixing the gesture and blocking-in with the brush followed by the dead coloring-in, the Ébauche.

As we proceed through the passages of the Pentimen- to your paint handling and brushwork will strive to be more authoritative, more expressive, more powerful than the illustrative, academic approach of Gérôme.

In addition to the Zoom recording the workshop is filmed in ultra-resolution 4K and edited to 2K. There is little visual difference between 4K and 2K other than the much more manageable file size of the latter.



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



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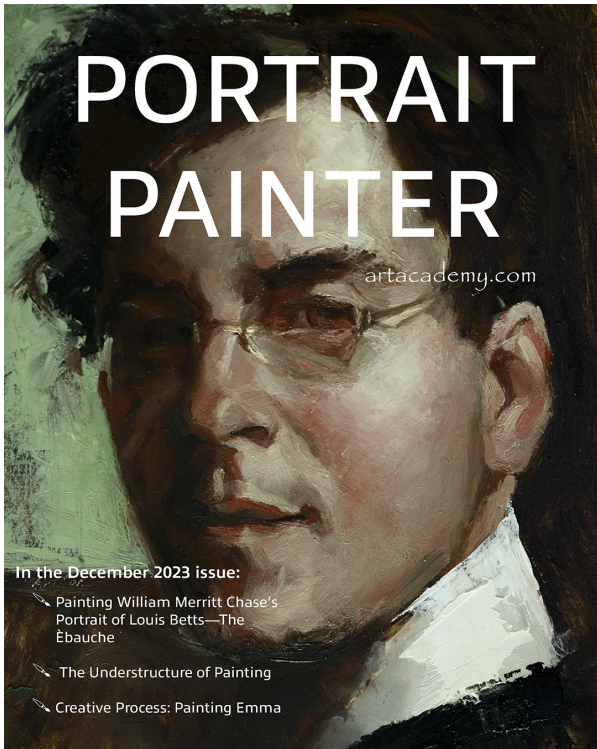
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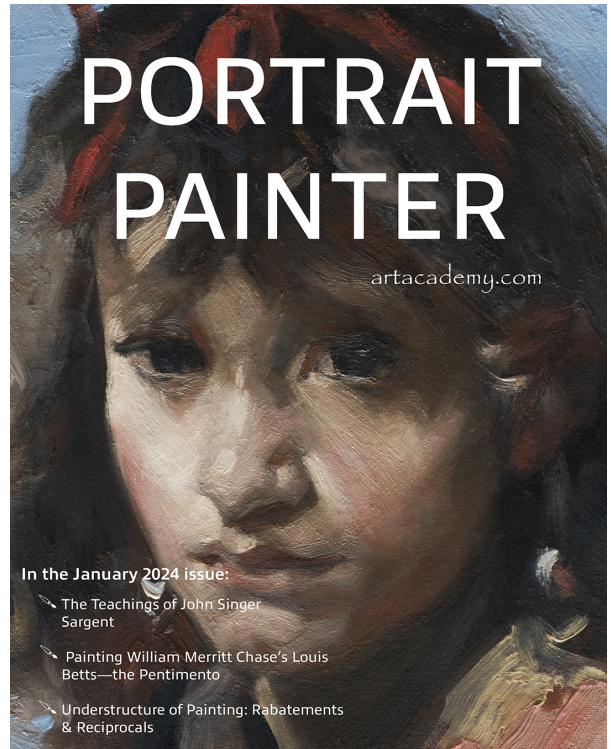
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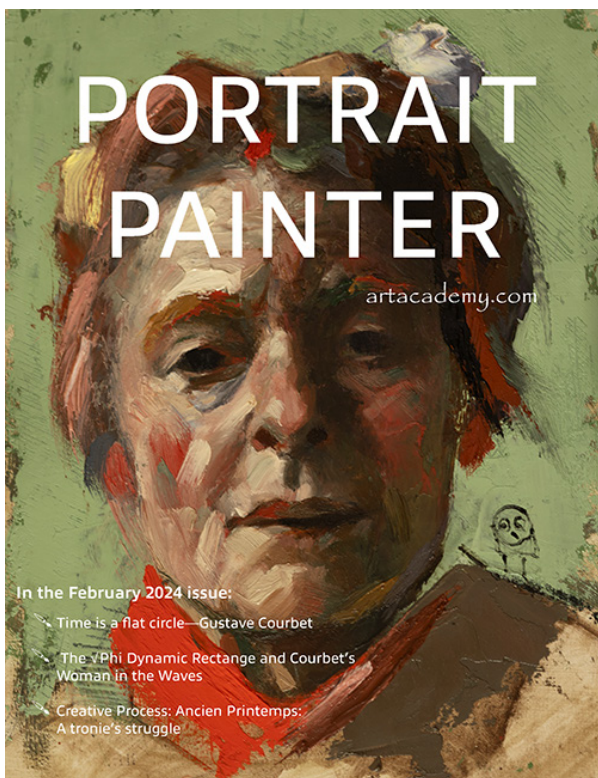
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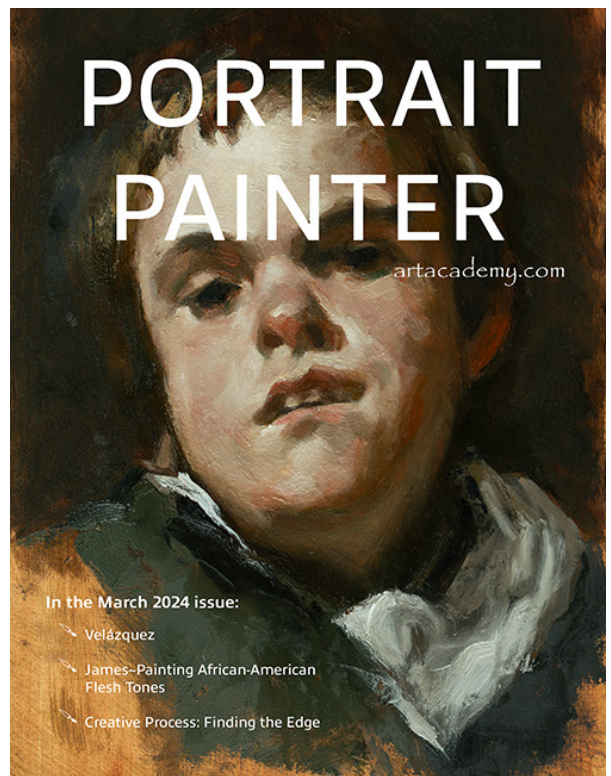
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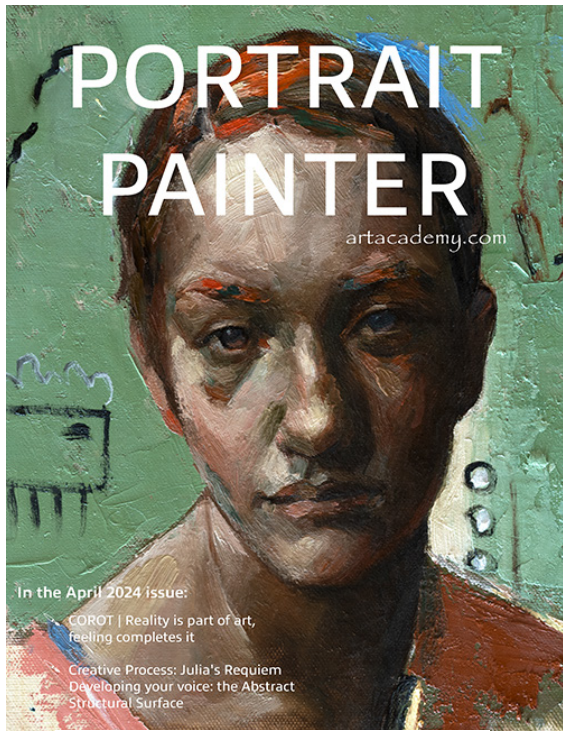
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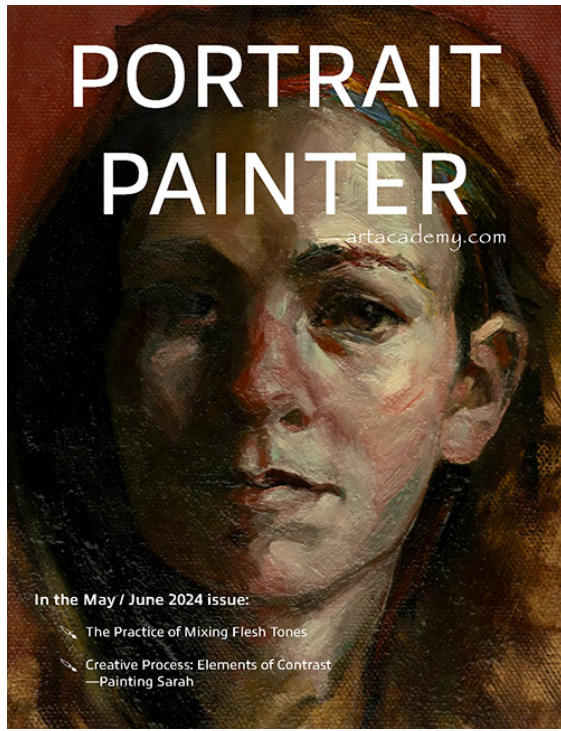
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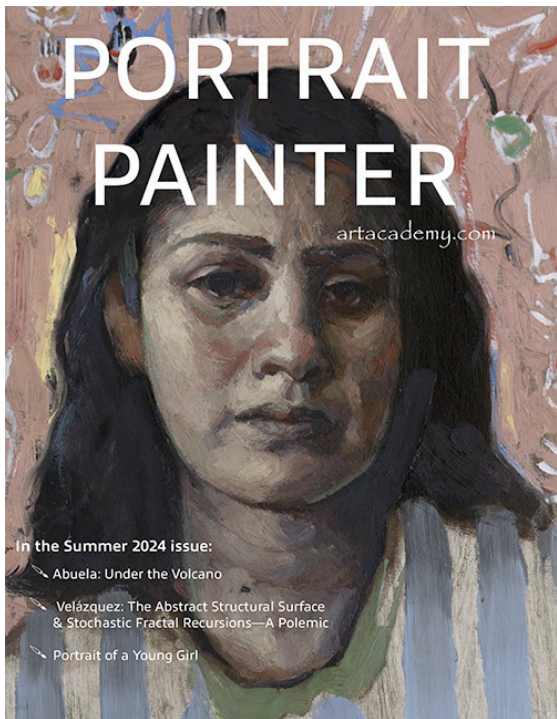
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