

April 2025

PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the April 2025 issue:

- ✂ Trauma at the easel! When a painting needs scraping down.
- ✂ Progress report: Where we're at with John Singer Sargent's *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*



A Word ...

The April 2025 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER focuses on the issues of expressive structure in painting.

In *Nettie* despite all of my alchemy and skill-set I could not breathe life into her. At least that is my feeling as I write this. There came a point where I had to scrape her down. Allowing a probation of sorts.

Progress Report: We've completed the second session of my current Zoom workshop of John Singer Sar-

gent's *Lady Agnew of Lochnam*. The first session focused on striking the arabesque and serving up the half-tones in the abstract.

The second session, the first pass of the pentimento, was establishing the structure of her expression.

Michael Britton
April 2025

Trifecta: Craft, Expression, Construct

Painting Nettie

As I trundle down the pathway, strewn with regrets and disappointments and fleeting moments of happiness, too quickly dissipated, toward my dusty demise and final brushstroke, I find myself painting more and more informally.

I have always endured an anguished ambiguity between the demands of academic painting and the exuberance of paint's inherent materiality and abstractions.

Of course, one wonders how it came to this.

Painting is a shared voyage of discovery—a moveable feast with an everchanging itinerary that remains indelibly influenced by our youth and beginnings.

There are three paths a beginning artist can choose from: the first is to just paint for the sheer joy of painting. The second is to assiduously acquire an academic skill-set; the third, to study post-modernist art theories and apply them in your practice.

There are pros and cons to each path, each dependant upon one's ambition. The self-taught artist soon hits a wall and their development as an artist is arrested. The academically trained artist runs the risk of becoming merely a technician. The study of post-modernist theory never hurt anyone. It will deepen your art. However, university programs assume that you have acquired your skill-set elsewhere.



Personally, I think one needs all three. If there is no joy to painting what is the point. Unquestionably, one must have a skill-set. The big question is just how far to pursue that skill-set. It is damnably difficult to transition from technician to artist.

We all need to find our sweet spot with the given that having acquired the fundamentals our skills will grow upon that foundation.

Except for the untrained whose painting will lack traction.

Nettie is a casual painting. My ambition is to paint a portrait as I would a plein air painting—more suggested than articulated. I strive for the paint—it's materiality and color—itsself to tell the story rather than just rely on the image.

And as I paint the weight of art history leans heavily on me. There is always the question of originality knowing that there is nothing new under the sun.

My practice, strategy is probably a better word, is to jump right in with a loaded brush to strike both the arabesque (the BIG shape) and the primary light/dark block-in pattern with dispatch.

I use the term striking the arabesque because it implies both rhythm and gesture.

The arabesque (the BIG shape) determines the likeness and, to a large extent, the expression. Get that wrong and your painting slips the leash and goes traipsing merrily down the garden path before plunging into the abyss.

Striking is a learned skill. No one is born with it. As a student John Singer Sargent often worked late into the night honing his striking skills. The effort paid handsome dividends.



Striking is first discerning and then establishing SHAPE. How wide, how tall, and what are the angles.

Once the BIG shape is struck it is then broken down into its respective smaller shapes. Basically, it's a matter of unpacking. One shape begets another. It's quite biblical in that respect. Or to put it in a post-modernist vein: it's a sequential schotastic fractal set of recursions defined with geometric specificity. Fun to say at cocktail tete-a-tete's but it can wring the life-juice right out of the art.

Painting informally is flying by the seat of your pants. I try to avoid beginning a painting with a preconceived idea of how I want it to look. But that is an impossibility. I have a rough idea. But such ideas are soon discarded as better ideas emerge. Very much like peeling an onion. Tears included.

As much as I would like to paint unencumbered, like a starry-eyed gamin given a week-end liberty with a freshly-minted credit card, my training hovers over me. Like a guardian angel redirecting me from the more malevolent neighborhood enterprises

You cannot cast off your training completely. It will always manifest in your work. On the other hand, a lack of training and skill will show too. There no secrets in painting to stow away.

Artists tell stories. It is in the telling, the diction, that determines whether or not the story is well received.

Again, my anguished ambiguity rises. I paint sculpturally serving up the half-tones in the abstract. Sargent complained incessantly that his students just did not grasp that concept. To be fair, students then jumped from atelier to atelier as they do today, and would have been heavily influenced by the academic, illustrative teaching of Gerome.

Poor bastards. Doomed to failure from the start.

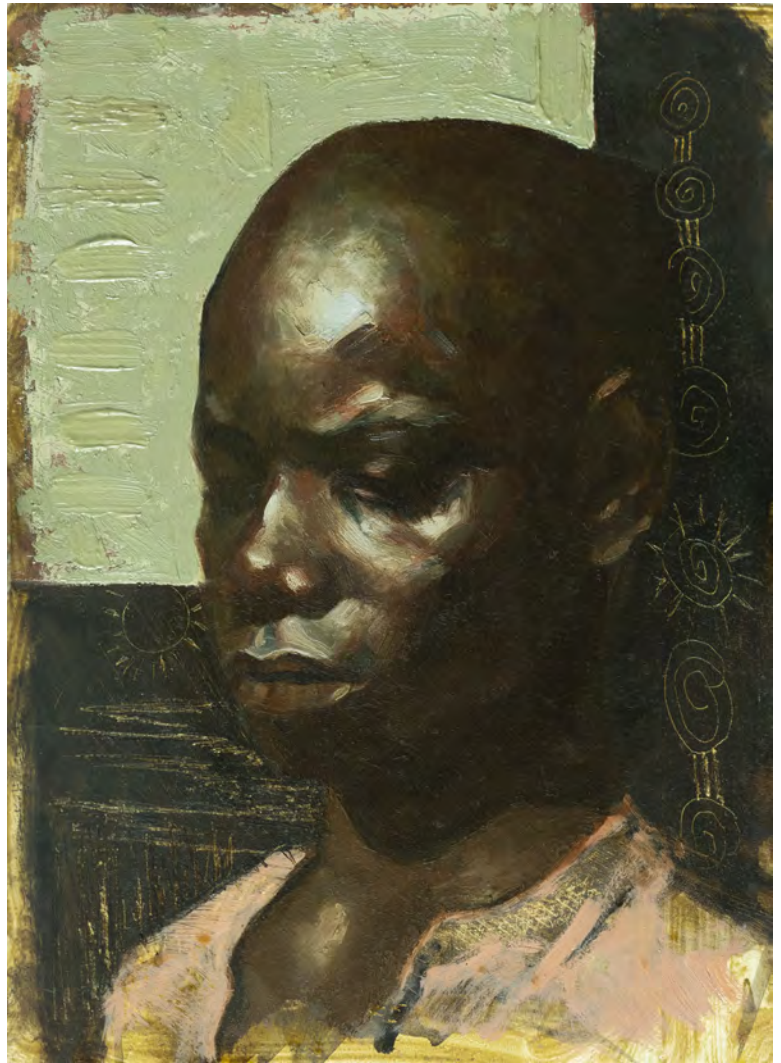


There is no cogent recipe to painting dark flesh tones. It is a matter of understanding color and acquiring a visual sensitivity to specific hue.

The biggest difference between painting dark flesh tones as opposed to caucasian flesh tones is the rapidity of value/tonal change. The darker the flesh tone the greater the contrast of light to dark.

Darker flesh tones tend to reflect, even throw off, light whereas caucasian flesh absorbs light to a greater extent. Unless, of course, your model is perspiring heavily under hot studio lights. But that's another kettle of fish altogether.

Amongst the varied considerations you need to pay particular attention to temperature. The lights will generally be cooler, the middle tones warm, and the dark tones are influenced by the background.



The inviolate rule of painting is general to specific. That, too, entails color. Keep it simple and look through the eyes of a sculptor. Doing so aids significantly in envisioning planar structures.

Ya gotta get the structure of the head in solidly. Take Sargent's advice and strive for the look of the wig-maker's block first. And then elaborate by breaking it down. Kinda like slappin' and pluggin' in pieces of colored clay.

The ebauche should be a tad warmer and darker than the intended final result. It is much, much easier to lighten a value than to later darken it. That way you avoid your color collapsing into mud.

And glazes won't help you. Not a wit.

And for the sweet sake of all that is good and decent in this soiled and tariffed orb do not chalk out by using too much white.

This 15 minute video demonstrates my thinking process of mixing four half-tones for the ebauch using a limited palette of five colors: flake white, naples yellow, indian red, terre verte and vine black.



Beginners are well-advised to spend almost as much time mixing their colors as painting.

Oh, I know, I know ... what's the fun in that! Where's the joy?

Color mixing is to the painter what playing scales is to the musician. It's a necessary discipline.

And as Nettie proceeds in the pentiment to a disquiet needles and pricks at me. Nettie is failing to thrive and I don't know why.

Something is missing. There is no bloom to this rose.

The facial structure looks sound. Nothing off about that ... yet ... yet ... sigh ...

Alas, I've come to a fork in the road. There's gonna be miles and miles to go before I sleep and after numerous bouts of self-recrimination and pity—a veritable pity fest—I render a conclusion that the problem(s) lay in the arabesque. The BIG shape is awkward.

And let's not even mention the ground. The shame.



There is nothing for it but to embark upon daddy's walk of shame—that long, lugubrious march to the river's edge toting a sack of mewling kittens to do the unspeakable.

Nobody likes to do this, but sometimes it is necessary. With the edge of my palette knife I scrape down Nettie endeavoring to excise the criminally offensive passages of paint.

You cannot entirely obliterate the image. A spectral remainder will still be there. One hopes that the good remains.

Do not use sandpaper! Not only will that liberate poisonous paint particles into the air you breathe but it will also leave an unpaintable slickness to the surface.

Still licking my festering wounds I assiduously check all of my measures. I am merciless!

Pinpricks are scratched in with a wood stylus. Particularly the placement of the anterior nasal spine (base of the nose) and the interstice of the mouth. Light-facing planes are hatched on the lower lip and Cupid's bow of the upper vermilion border.

My plumb line is weld like a raging, if not slightly demented, whip checking both my vertical and horizontal alignments.

Exhausted by my intemperate fury I stand back, cradling a cuppa tea, no milk, no sugar, to glare at Nettie like a prosecuting cuckold for whatever misdeeds she may have committed and thus far undiscovered.



The wall that challenges and thwarts every artist is Perception. We look. But we do not see what is plainly there in front of us. Our filters—our worldview, our politics, our race, our gender, etc., etc.,—distort and obfuscate what is real.

Beginners must first tackle symbolic preconceptions. We look at a mouth and we draw a symbol for it. The same with the nose and the eyes. The locus of realist art training is to overcome that misperception. Symbolic preconceptions are sneaky, they're just waiting for a chance to break into your painting like a cybercriminal sniffing out credit card numbers.

Advanced artists have their biases too. A common plague, once generic symbolic preconceptions are carted off to their well-deserved penitentiary, is to infer the self portrait. Every portrait is honored with our own nose, our own mouth and eyes.

It never ends. The painter's antibiotic is the measuring stylus and plumb line. You need to be merciless with your tools. There can be no half-measures.

But there is a caveat. Of course, there's always a caveat. DO NOT PREMEASURE. I stress to my students to take their best guess first and then check the measures. It is the process of first striking and then correcting that you train your 'eye' to accurately assess shape, proportion and placement.

The second element of art-making's trifecta is Expression/Spirit.

Whereas your craft is developed with a convergent thinking process—logical, rational—expression is divergent. For me expression resides in the exuberant play of oil paint's materiality, the abstract structural surface and color and autographical mark making.

The emphasis is on PLAY. Paint with a child's story-telling mind. But a child with a love of diction and schotastic fractal recursions dancing the cha-cha-cha in their brush work.



Art's third element in the trifecta is the CONSTRUCT. This is the ongoing advancement of the language of painting. It is the most difficult element of art making, one that very few achieve.

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) managed a quantum leap from academic painter to his now renowned Symbolism. It is much, much more than just a style. Language, of which painting is one, is a construct of inferences and syntax.

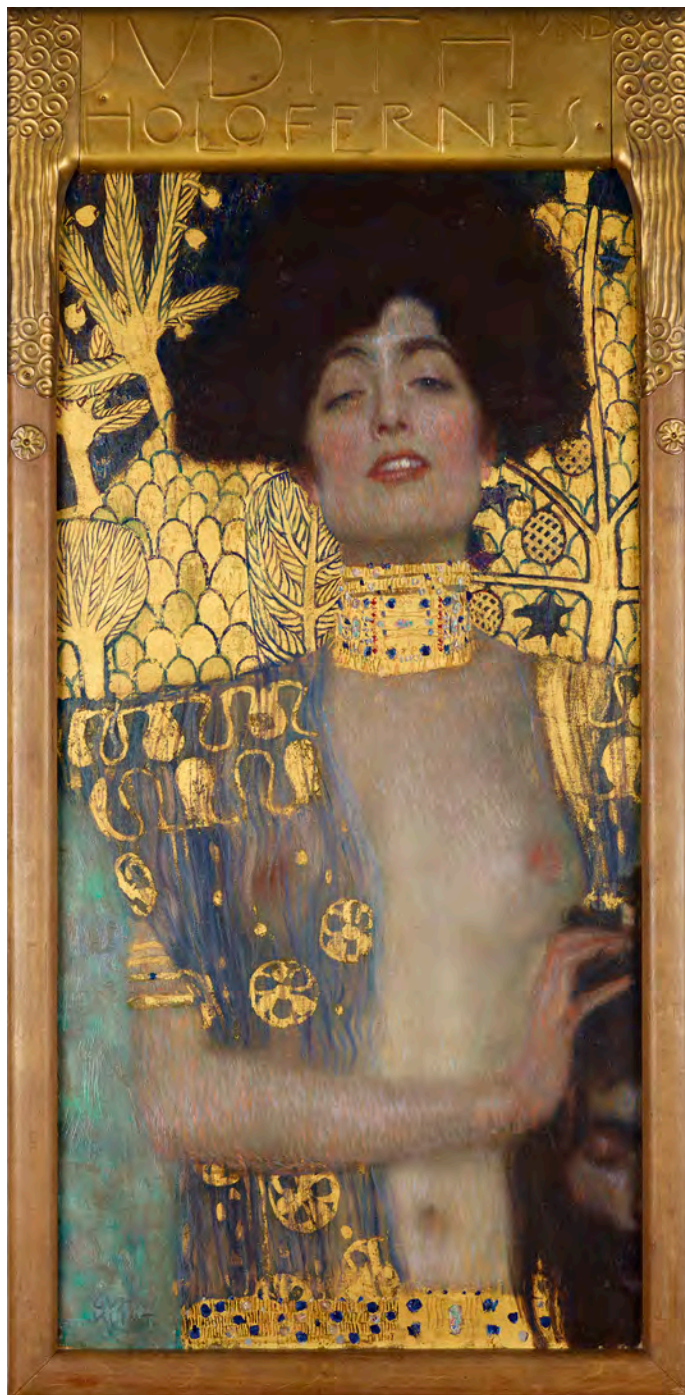


Top: Gustav Klimt, Prince William Nii Nortey Dowuona, 1897

Right: Gustav Klimt, Judith I, 1901

Klimt's leap did not come out of nowhere. He was heavily influenced by Toulouse Lautrec and Art Nouveau with an ample dose of Byzantium iconography. Yep, nothing is truly new under this sun.

Artists rework things. We twist and turn them inside out.



Klimt lived during the first era of globalization that began roughly in 1870 and all came crashing down in August 1914.

Before 1914 one could travel the world without a passport. As with income tax, passports were supposed to be a temporary measure. Something to get us through the war.

Goods, people (the poor huddled in steerage seeking a new life in a new land, and the privileged white dudes on deck seeking out another gin & tonic), and ideas were traded freely. It was an era of light. Art requires light to thrive. It withers in autarky.

As with all good times the barkeep inevitably shouts out 'last call' and the light flickers and dims and darkness descends. Time is a flat circle.

It's deja vu all over again.

Back now to our regular scheduled programming: I consider *Nettie* a failure as a painting. Despite all my alchemy of skill and knowledge I could not birth her. But, dammit, I will take it to the bitter and tearful end. There are always lessons to be learned. Or, at the very least, repeated.

Alas, that is the way of art. Everyone has their disappointments. Rembrandt, Sargent, Rubens all had their disappointments. Sargent would arrest a bad start by immediately wiping the reprobate off of the face of the world. Or canvas. He wouldn't hesitate for a moment.

I like the way the auteur Robert Altman put it: 'Only mediocrities consistently work at their best.'

Technique alone does not guarantee a good painting. And since I wandered into that weedy garden, Sargent's contemporary, William Adolf Bougeareau never managed to pull off a good painting. His works are merely visual spectacles of treacly portrayals of virginal girls and young women. Soft pornography for upper class cigar smoking and brandy swilling salons. Alas, he is a god at far too many academies. Be careful of who you worship and aspire to.



Progress report: Lady Agnew of Lochnaw

We're now past the second session of studying Sargent's Lady Agnew of Lochnaw, aka Gertrude Vernon, the quintessential late Victorian party girl.

Her languorous pose and pallor is attributable to her ill health. She had just recovered from a nasty bout of influenza.

Sargent wrote that he had six sessions with her. The painting was interrupted after the second session due to the flu's second bout with the fragile Gertrude.

I surmise that it was during this interval between the second and third sittings that Sargent would have worked up the background and spectacularly painted dress. The practice with complex



drapery is to mount the dress on a maniken that is set into pose and the primary folds pinned into place.



This is a portrait of great subtlety of expression. She is leaning back into a well-stuffed, wing-backed armchair and her head is tilted slightly forward and ever-so-slightly to the right (a 12:02 angle). Her jowl is softened by the vague gathering of the digastric muscles under her jaw. O-boy-o-boy, I anticipate that Gertrude's jowl is going to be trouble. Great subtlety demands razor precision.

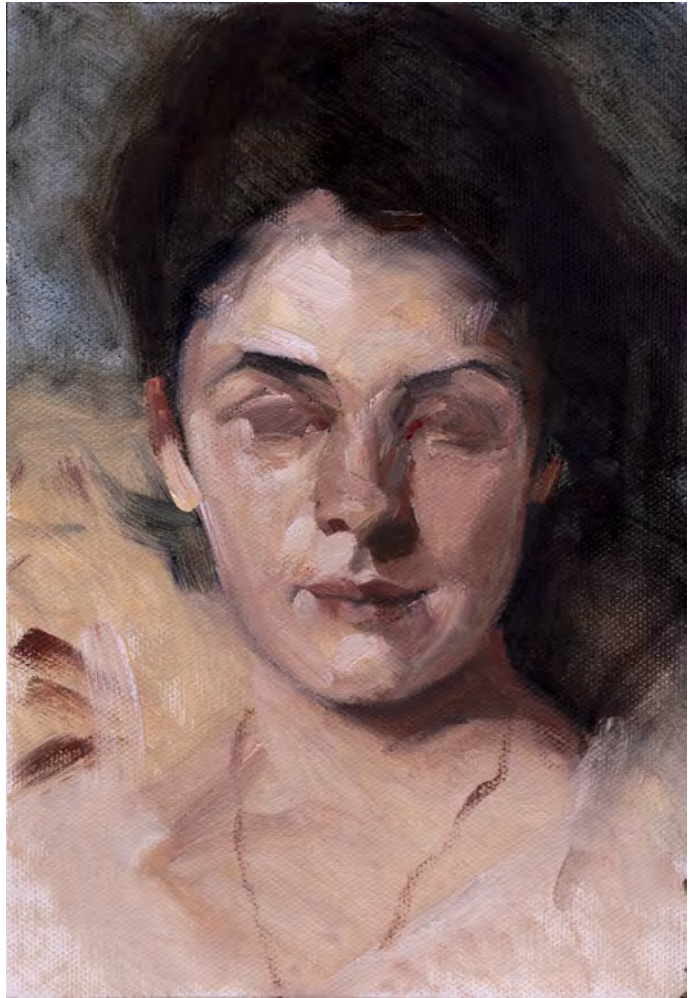
Pictured here is the only known photograph of Gertrude taken at the time of her engagement to Lord Ashley in 1889. Three years before Sargent's portrait.

A recommended practice is to paint a quick thumbnail sketch, a pochade, before diving into the deep end of your canvas.

Not only does the pochade lend insight to how the painting will look at a distance, not to mention the working out of the color scheme and pictorial divisions, but it also alerts you to troubled waters laying in wait to ambush the impatient painter.

Despite my efforts I could not source any evidence of Sargent executing a pochade, or even a preliminary sketch, of Gertrude. Surely he must have and possibly trashed them later or, maybe, just maybe, they are ensconced in a soggy attic in London.

Sargent made numerous studies for Lady X, 1884. Nevertheless, take an hour or two to do a pochade. It's a good rehearsal.



An 8x10" canvas or panel is a good size. I used a very limited palette of just four colors: white, yellow ochre, indian red and vine black.

Bear in mind that a pochade is not a fully realized painting in miniature. It is a study of structure, color and pictorial divisions.

The curriculum of the course is too both study and follow Sargent's painting practice as is both known and feasible.

Sargent's teaching stressed getting the foundation and planar elements of the head foregoing the features. Apparently, according to the literature, Sargent's students never quite grasped the concept of serving up the half-tones in the abstract. Maybe I have better students.

Our loaded brushes held out with arm extended, our heads cocked back, and our eyes fallen slightly out-of-focus the arabesque is struck, followed by our initial markings for the facial matrix.

There is no pre-measuring. Except for placing the top of the hair and the base of the chin. We, like Sargent, are working sight-size. Our paintings are slightly below life size. Just as with the original.

Once the arabesque and its attendant gesture is struck to the best of our collective ability we then proceed to verify and prosecute with stylus and plump line our initial strike.

That is how you train your eye to see. Striking is an acquired skill, one that Sargent worked at like a half-starved Bangladeshi orphan sewing clothes for our fast fashion.

That is the secret of the masters: Do the work.

Once satisfied that our strike is accurate we gaily blocked in the ground and hair with much diluted paint. Blocking in the ground provides a reference point for the initial flesh tones. Gertrude's flesh tone appears quite pale. There is a palour to her. But her flesh tones are not that light! For sweet sake of all that remains good in our time do not chalk-out! Better to go a bit darker and warmer at this early stage.

The half-tones of the face are now served up in the abstract as per Sargent's teaching ... and what the heck does that mean? Well, it means that the face is deconstructed to its elemental planar structures so that it resembles a wig maker's mount.



Everything, everything is checked. The vertical and horizontal alignments plumbed, the measures with my stylus. Pin pricks are fixed less I stray.

This solidifies the beginner's training, knowing how to identify and correct errors.

That was the locus of the first session: striking, verifying, correcting, blocking in and serving it up in the abstract from whence the expression develops.



Michael Britton, *Boy with Hare Lip*
(after Mancini), Oil on Panel, 2025

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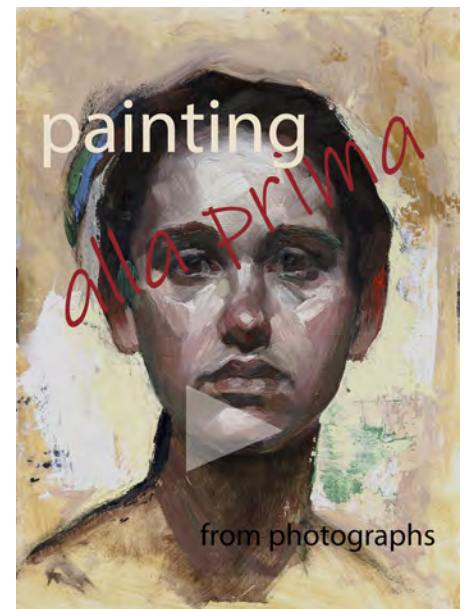
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The second session is the first pass of the pentimento.

The ground is further established enabling us to better gauge Gertrude's flesh tones. The very real danger for beginner's is chalking out—going too light. I cannot stress that enough!

Strategy is critical. Mix your flesh tones a little darker and warmer than will be the final intent. If you render the flesh tones too light, and the darks too dark at this early stage you'll find yourself boxed into a corner from whence there is no escape.

Bear in mind that we still have drawing issues that demand resolving.

The agenda of the pentimento's first pass is the plastic structuring of the expression. Gertrude's gaze is a major hurdle, followed by that mouth. That mouth!



My drawing of the mouth, particularly the interstice, is accurate to within less than a millimetre. It is the overly hard edges of the musculo-labial tractor that gives her a hard, tense expression.

I'm not worried about that. For now. As the painting progress in the second pass of the pentimento the muscle edges will be relaxed. First, however, comes structure.

Gertrude fell ill again after the second session with Sargent. And the third session was postponed for several weeks giving time for Sargent to thoroughly analyze the structure of her expression. Needless to say, Gertrude would not/could not have held that expression for the duration of her six sessions. Her relaxed, inquisitive expression was the result of not-so-relaxed, very inquisitive and analytical work on Sargent's part.

To be continued ...

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

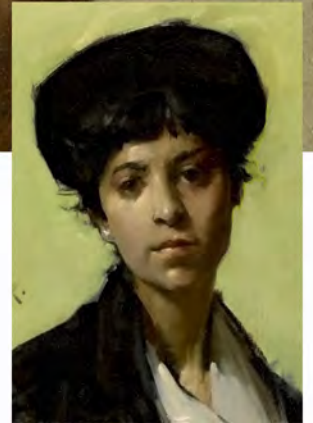
A video workshop by Michael Britton

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

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