



PORTRAIT PAINTER

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Issue 20:



Painting Bravura



William Merritt Chase's Portrait of
Louis Betts

William Merritt Chase

the only way to really understand the process of the brush is to copy it

A painting demonstration by William Merritt Chase was a 'must go' to event at the Chase School of Art (in 1898 it became the New York School of Art and is now the Parsons School of Design) in turn of the 19th/20th Century New York. Often dressed in a white linen suit, he was fond of his sartorial splendor, Chase could both entertain and paint with nary of drop of paint trespassing onto his suit.



Chase's coeval and fierce competitor Robert Henri would schedule his demonstrations at the same time. It was a titanic battle of the brushes.

Then, like now, a successful painter/teacher/demonstrator must seamlessly entertain with both banter and brush while painting at a high level. Not an easy task.

Within the more intimate confines of his classroom Chase would demonstrate the practice of painting using fresh fish as his subject matter. The lessons in painting fresh fish are manifold.

His students included luminaries of American Art: Georgia O'Keefe and Edward Hopper amongst many.



Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872
Oil on canvas, 18.9 x 24.8" (48x63 cm)

Chase studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Munich for six years (1872-77) along with fellow American painters Frank Duveneck and John Twachtman where he learned the practice of virtuoso bravura painting.

The 1870's were a pivotal time in painting. A small painting, one of six produced by Claude Monet in Le Havre, sparked a revolution that spelled the slow unravelling (or ravelling, they mean the same) of the Academy des Beaux Arts' ossified rule.

It's usually the smaller paintings that cause a ruckus. Large, monumental works lack immediacy and intimacy.

Insults were soon exchanged. To be called an Impressionist was a derogatory assessment of a painter's mettle. Like any melee at a local Saturday farmer's market insults were hurled back. Academic painting was derided as *l'art de pompier*, after the pretentious feathers decorating then Parisienne firemen's helmets and wordplay on pompous (the French *pompeus*).

Events were unfolding too, southeast of Paris in festive Munich. The Royal Academy of Fine Arts was in its golden age. A spirit of fervent creativity bubbled forth that would influence painting for generations. Students here were liberated from the stultifying academy of Paris. Brushes were wielded with bravura flourishes. Paint the painting not just the subject was the order of the day.

The young William Merritt Chase flourished and flowered.



William Merritt Chase, *Man with Bandana*, 1872/8, Oil on Panel, 25.4 x 20.32 cm



William Merritt Chase, *The Spanish Woman*, 1868,
Oil on Panel, 25.4 x 19.7 cm

Chase's *Spanish Woman* is the subject of my upcoming four-session Zoom workshop.

Tuesdays, April 21 to May 12
18:30 - 21:00 PST (California)

For more info and the syllabus/supply list write me at:

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Painting bravura demands a succinct economy of means. It is a distillation of complex form into a singular effect: A brush stroke struck with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form and the materiality of paint.

A well-wrought bravura portrait appears effortless, but that is an illusion. Bravura requires an architecture, hidden from the final view, that supports the spectacle of well-rendered brush strokes.

The supporting architecture of bravura must be constructed plastically through the eyes of a sculptor; each strategic layer strengthening the next, preparing for the final *fleche*—the decisive strike.

You cannot switch from an illustrative rendering to a bravura flourish. It doesn't work. It doesn't read true.

Many bravura paintings will fail. They always begin with joyful promise—a well-struck arabesque and convincing *ébauche*—but somewhere, usually in the final assault, the painting collapses. Like a love affair scarred by disappointments.

Sometimes you will paint above your head and everything melds together into a wondrous unified whole. Those are the paintings painters live for.

In those dark moments when mourning the ruins of a painting I remind myself that only mediocrities consistently work at their best. Better to scrape down the palette and begin anew. More wary now of the perils that lay ahead.

Painting Louis

Louis Betts (1849-1961) was a student of Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art. He also studied with Chase in New York. Betts became a celebrated portrait painter in his own right.

The process of painting begins with the *ébauche*. The *ébauche* comprises both the striking of the arabesque, blocking-in and the 'dead' coloring.

Copying master paintings is a critical element in your painting education. The language of painting is significantly different from the language of the photograph. It is only through copying that you learn the language; the grammar and syntax of the paint brush; it's concordant, fractile assemblies that very much like music proffer a direct conduit to the viewer's unconscious mind.



William Merritt Chase, *Portrait of Louis Betts* [detail], Oil on Canvas, 20 x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", c. 1894

The beginner artist will understandably be intimidated. And you should be. Portrait drawing and painting is one of the highest endeavors of human achievement. It does not come easy. However, bear in mind that we all have weaknesses and strengths. Technicians generally do not make for great artists; artists often struggle with technique. And if you are filled with self-doubt ... well, welcome to the club.

What you'll need to begin: I'm using a small canvas/panel, 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ X 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " toned with a yellow ochre imprimatura. Titanium/Zinc white, yellow ochre, a pale yellow (I use lead tin yellow), and vine or ivory black. Your medium (begin lean—4 parts turp to 1 part oil) and if you're using professional grade paints I strongly recommend calcium carbonate, available at many art stores.

The imprimatura is the initial toning of the canvas, applied with a much diluted earth color such as yellow ochre or a tempered burnt sienna. It is applied unevenly, traditionally with either vertical or horizontal strokes.

The imprimatura activates the canvas giving it a visual electrical charge. It is ill-advised to work on a white canvas.



A large, loaded round bristle brush held at arm's length, my eyes squinted until I see only the elemental shapes that define the planar structures of the head ... I strike!

No prisoners!

The arabesque is struck from my gut. A trained painter will feel if it is correct or not. The untrained will stumble timidly out of the gate.

Only after the arabesque is struck and the facial proportions indicated—the browline, the anterior nasal spine (base of the nose) and the condylar process (where jaw meets ear lobe) suffice—do I snatch up my thin and worn little stick to check my measures.

On a good day I'll nail the measures to the cross with a laser precision. But not everyday is a good day. Sometimes life's libels breach the sanctuary of my untidy studio and a string of invective is hurled at whomever and whatever defenseless creature might be lingering nearby. And then I'll wipe down the canvas and start anew.

An array of three half-tones are prepared on my palette and served up in the abstract. It is very much a sculptural process akin to slapping moist colored clay onto the armature of my arabesque. I don't care a wit about the features. They are a distraction. Worse, at this early stage the facial features are sirens, sea-nymphs, cloying Lolitas, serenading me with sultry come-hithers, luring me toward painting doom.

Being a gentleman I will give a friendly nod to the placement of the features. But just a nod before scurrying away. Don't be feature centric! Don't be feature centric! Don't be feature centric! ... I'm a married man dammit!

The planar structures are rendered with brush, palette knife, grubby fingers and my steadfast companion, my wooden stylus, Rocinante, to scratch out the light lit planes. It's an additive/subtractive rally.

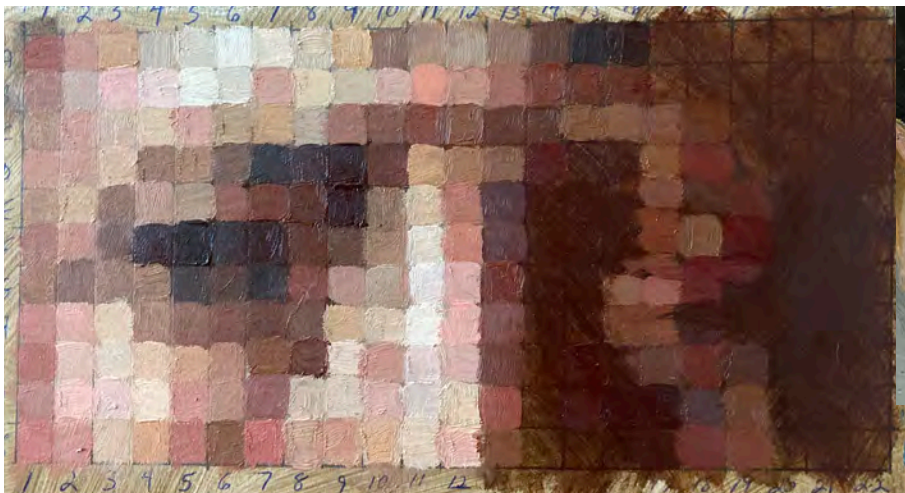


Pentimento is derived from the Italian *pentirsi*: meaning to repent.

It is always a sound practice to re-check all of your measures. Things do go awry. Perception is a thief in the night, a pickpocket loitering at an ATM, sweetly whispering what you want to hear and see. Leading you merrily down the garden path until you're sunk in the muck of symbolic preconceptions.

My palette is expanded to nine colors and with my measures verified I proceed to spotting in the color/value notes. This too is a nigh sculptural process.

The criteria of spotting color/value notes is: first, select your color and value; second, place it succinctly; third, shape it so that it has a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form. Yes, those words again. And again and again and again.



An excellent exercise is to reduce the head to pixels and assign each a value to model the head. Not as easy as it first appears, but the effort will definitely move the needle of your color mixing and placement skills.

A sound architecture established and a heaping platter of brio—painting bravura is a spectacle—I wield my brush like a samurai greeting the morning's rising sun with a lowered lance readied to charge the windmills of painterly doubt. Damn the mixed metaphors!

Well, that's the myth of bravura.

The reality is colder. Sombre. Bravura requires a calculus, a reductive process of deconstructing the planar elements with a tactile sensibility coupled with a keen awareness of fractal relationships.

This can only be learned by copying the best works of the best painters.

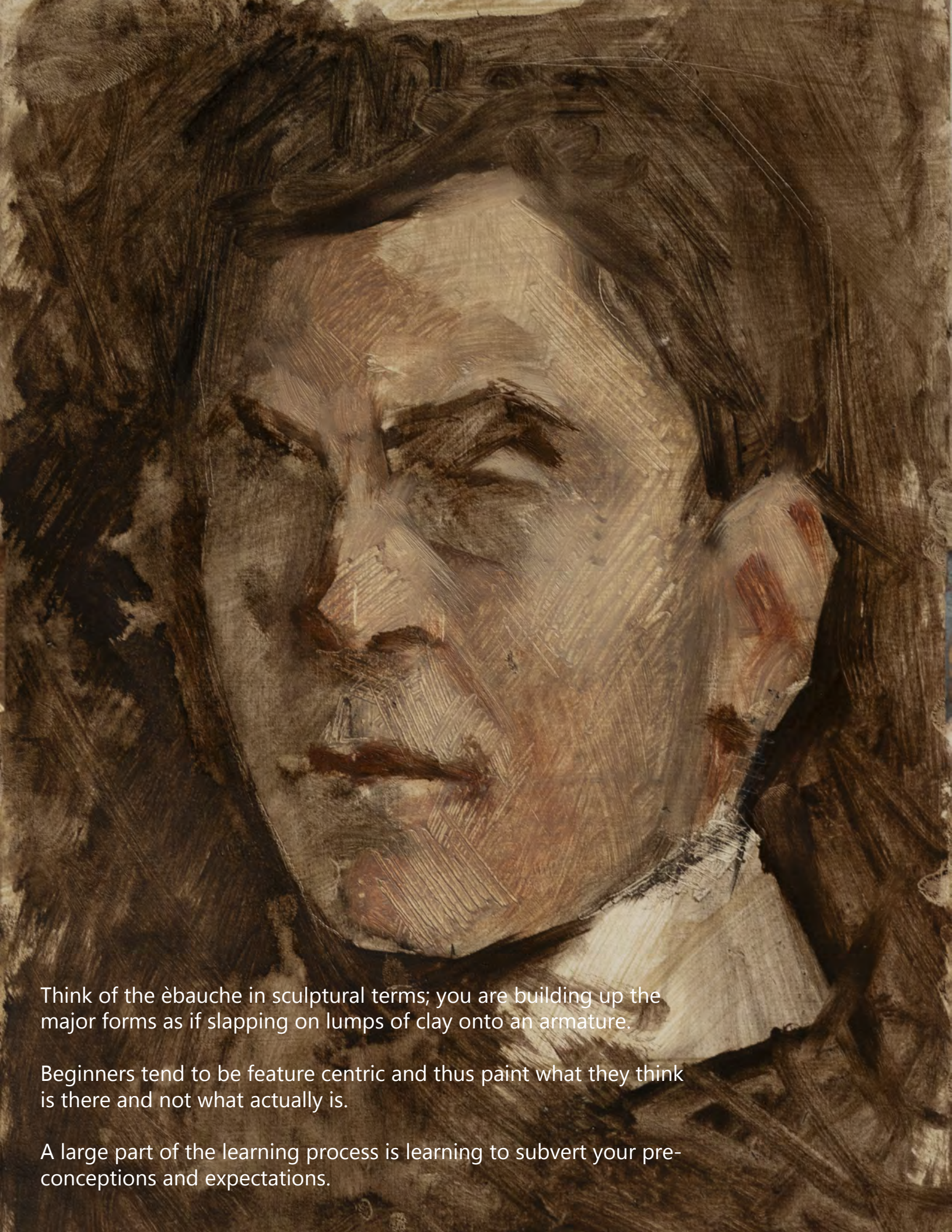
Deeper lessons are found in copying unfinished works that allow you to peek into their closets and gain an insight or two of the how's and why's of good painting practice.



As I paint I talk to myself. Much of it is banal banter sorting out the previous day's wounds and injustices. Berating myself for being bullied into overtipping an insolent waiter. But also as I struggle to resolve a facial form's expression I'll call out it's anatomical name. *Incisus labii inferioris*! Names are important. Names render vague forms concrete.

And after much sweat, tears and paint smeared fingers the end result should appear effortless. As if it were nothing to me at all.





Think of the *ébauche* in sculptural terms; you are building up the major forms as if slapping on lumps of clay onto an armature.

Beginners tend to be feature centric and thus paint what they think is there and not what actually is.

A large part of the learning process is learning to subvert your preconceptions and expectations.



