

Issue 19

PORTRAIT PAINTER

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A Word ...

The French Impressionist—how he hated that word—Edgar Degas was not a naturally gifted prodigy. He worked hard at acquiring his fundamental skill-set and emerged as one of the titans of 19th Century art.

This is something to bear in mind on those cold-dismal February mornings when we tend to beat ourselves up. If only I had been born with that talent. If only art loved me as much as I loved it.

Nobody likes to be nagged. ... however, without the fundamental skill-set of drawing and painting you are cheating yourself. And possibly the world of whatever innate gifts you may have.

Lemme tell ya somethin': In my long teaching career I've seen many a 'talented' student who rests on their little laurels and sooner or later hits the proverbial brick wall. They go no further. Often the reason is intellectual sloth.

And then there are those who doggedly pursue and acquire their skill-set. Yes, there are tears. Sometimes I bring them on with the hard truth that going a few steps back puts you on the road forward again. You need to keep hammering away at that brick wall.

Inevitably the wall crumbles revealing vistas of painterly possibilities. And that is where the real journey of discovering and making art begins.



Michael Britton
February 2026



ooking for Edgar—Down the Rabbit Hole

Edgar Degas detested the term Impressionist, he considered himself a Realist painter.

Edgar was not a prodigy. He had the desire but showed little talent. His early portrait drawing, an example shown here, exhibits every trademark of the untrained, self-taught artist. It is replete with symbolic preconceptions and looks like every other beginner's drawing.

What does show through his early drawings and paintings is the melancholic disposition of an unsettled youth. Well, join the club.

I say this not to denigrate Degas, but to marvel at how far he travelled and how his genius gradually took form.

At the impressionable age of twenty, Degas met the elderly Neo-Classical master, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. At best, this meeting was the nickel-tour of Ingres' studio attended by many potential art students at that time. Nonetheless the few polite words Ingres imparted to Degas had a profound effect that would lay dormant for over a decade—a slowly, germinating seed.

I suspect that at the conclusion of this studio tour the young Degas was sold on signing up for art lessons under the tutelage of Louis Lamothe, a not particularly gifted pupil of Ingres. An early version of the time-share vacation condo schtick.





Louis Lamothe, *Self-Portrait*, 1859

There isn't much about Louis in the literature. He has fallen irrevocably into the caliginous abyss of obscurity.

Nonetheless, he would have instilled in the young Degas the fundamentals of drawing and painting.

If Degas hadn't acquired the fundamentals it is unlikely he would have gone far. And, like Louis, erased.

It is Degas' reverence for Ingres that paved the pathway for the unfolding of Degas' genius.

Ingres was, and is, the celebrated master of Neo-Classicism whose underpinning is the sober rationality of Euclidian geometry (Dynamic symmetry) and the trundling about and disinterring of ancient tropes of virtue in long lost Athens.

Frankly, I'm not so sure about the 'virtue' element of Neo-Classicism. Unless the lascivious offering up of young women for entertainment was considered a virtue. Mind you, Ingres' celebrity was during the reign of Napoleon when the strong did what they could and the weak suffered what they must. Time is indeed a flat circle.

I am not a great fan of Ingres' paint handling. His brushwork is enamel slick—the eye glides over his supine odalisques like fingertips caressing an eel. The overt sexuality of Ingres' oeuvre (courtesans lounging languidly in lavish gynatoriums) is, I suspect ... now, I am not a psychoanalyst, but given a few drinks ... may be the frustrated leakage of his diminutive stature (5'1") and an annoyingly high-pitched, trilling voice. Not exactly a lady's man in the swashbuckling era of conquering Grenadiers.

That said, there is a disconcertingly powerful presence to his paintings once one looks past the narrative. His figures are pulled and twisted into an otherworldliness that immediately engages and simultaneously delights and vexes the unconscious mind.

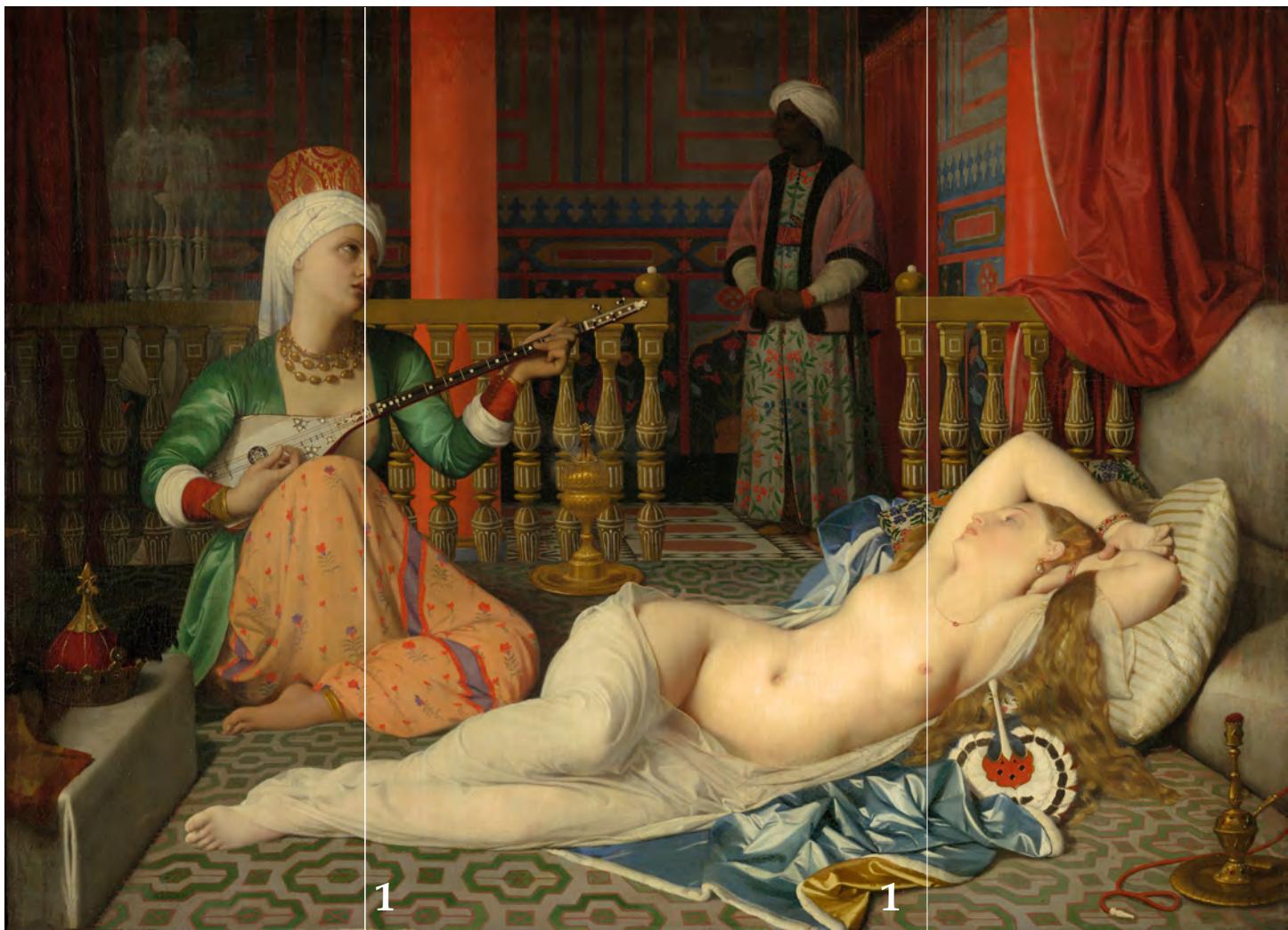


Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque, Enslaved Woman and Eunuch*, 1836, Oil on Canvas, 72.1 x 100.3 cm (inches), Collection Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University

Her languid, available pose and undress, the odalisque, a concubine, is offered as the sexual prize for the presumed male proprietor of this lavish interior—and by proxy, the viewer. We are irrevocably drawn into Ingres' fantasy and imaginings of the near Orient. Namely, Istanbul. But in Ingres' musings it is long ago conquered Constantinople with its mystiques and intrigues. And harems. All within the grasp and feverish imaginings of the Napoleonic adventurer with a few francs jingling in his purse.

Ingres never traveled to Turkey. His imaginings were stirred by stories and novels set in feverish, exotic locales.

The Orientalist 'aesthetic' would soon be turned on its head by the gritty social realism of Manet and Degas. Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, is a transactional show-me-the-money rebuke of Orientalism.

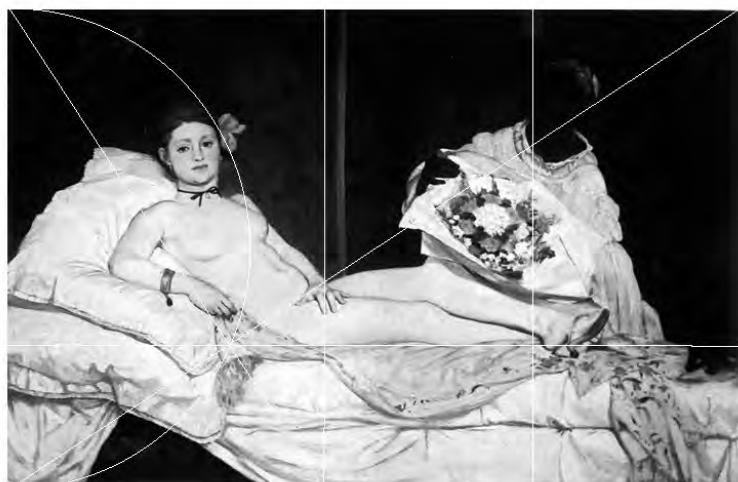


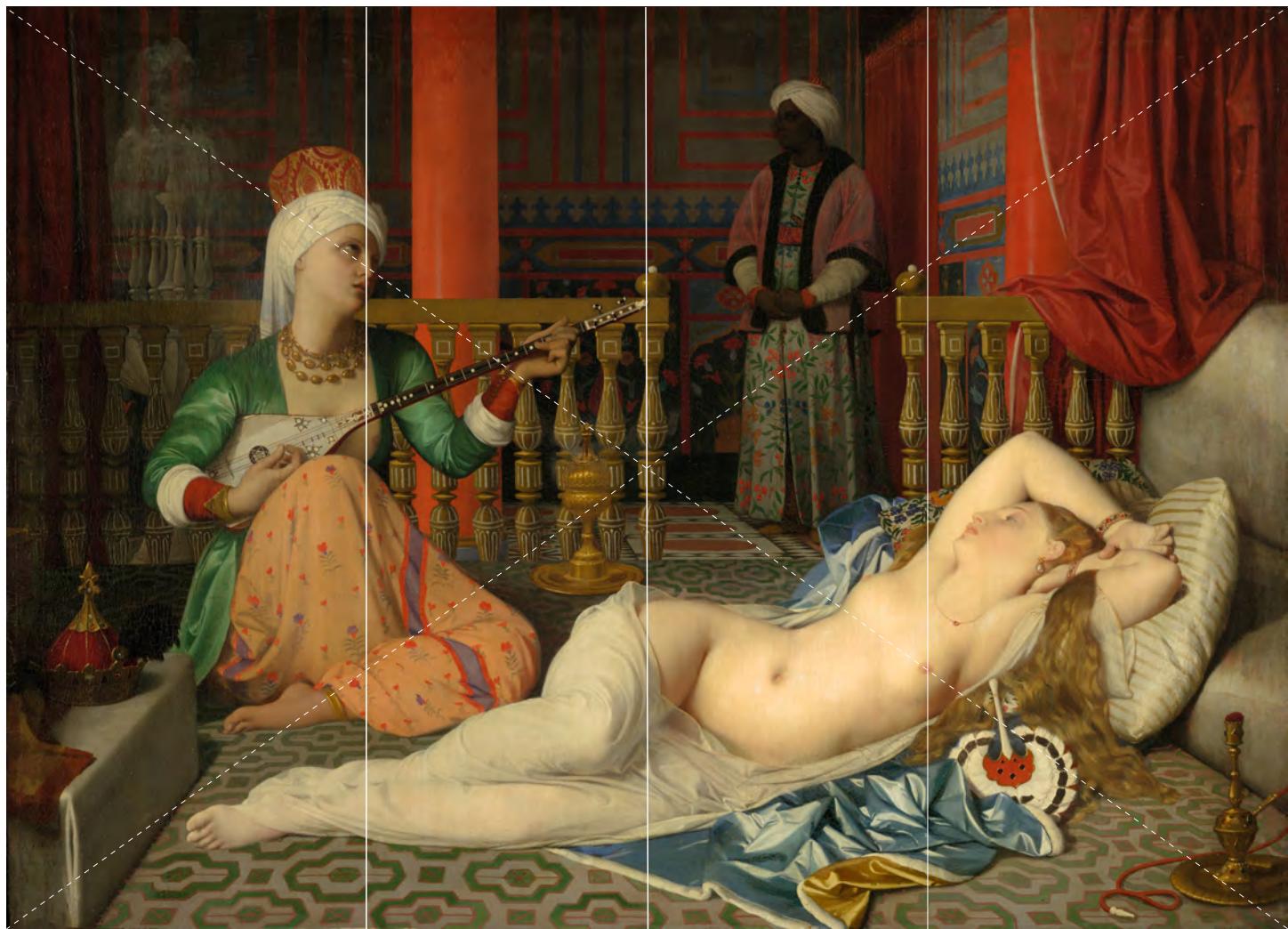
Until the 1960's dynamic symmetry (or painter's sacred geometry) was a part of every serious painter's tool kit. It is taught in only a few academies now and even then is given short shrift.

Dynamic symmetry is the harmonious divisions of pictorial space. It proffers a direct conduit to the viewer's unconscious mind with a heightened intention and clarity.

Let's begin with a reconstruction of Ingres' salacious fantasy.

The Rabatement (1) is the singularly most powerful composition tool. It is simply applying a square, or two overlapping squares, onto the end(s) of a canvas.



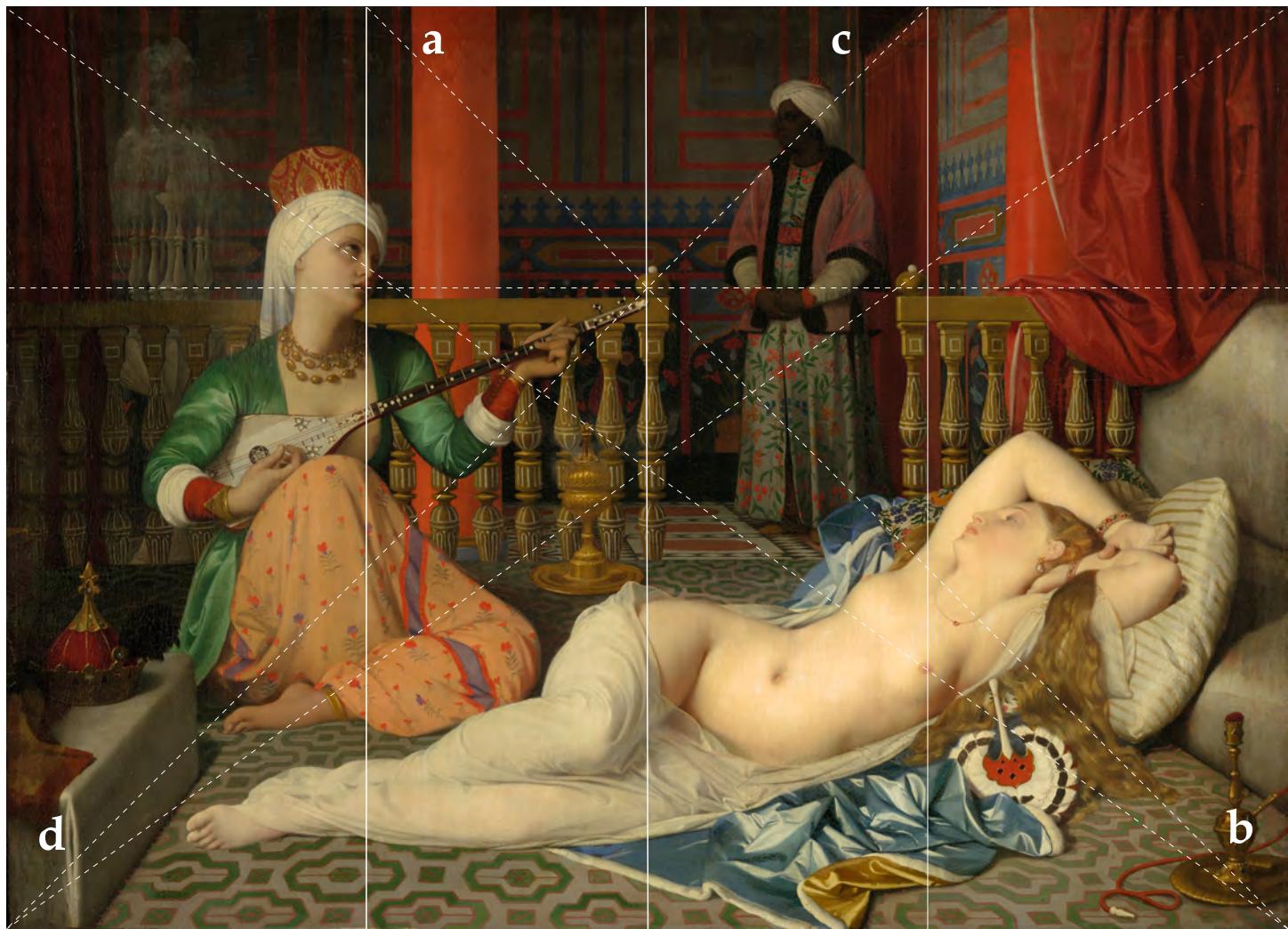


Diagonals are also powerful tools that are used to build an erector set of intersection points.

The two primary diagonals are rendered and the centerpoint of the canvas established.

As we reconstruct Ingres' composition take note of the pictorial elements, i.e., the Abyssinian slave's wrist and lateral canthus of the eye, etc. are placed upon the primary diagonal. Also the naughty bit of areola on the odalisque. These are not accidents.

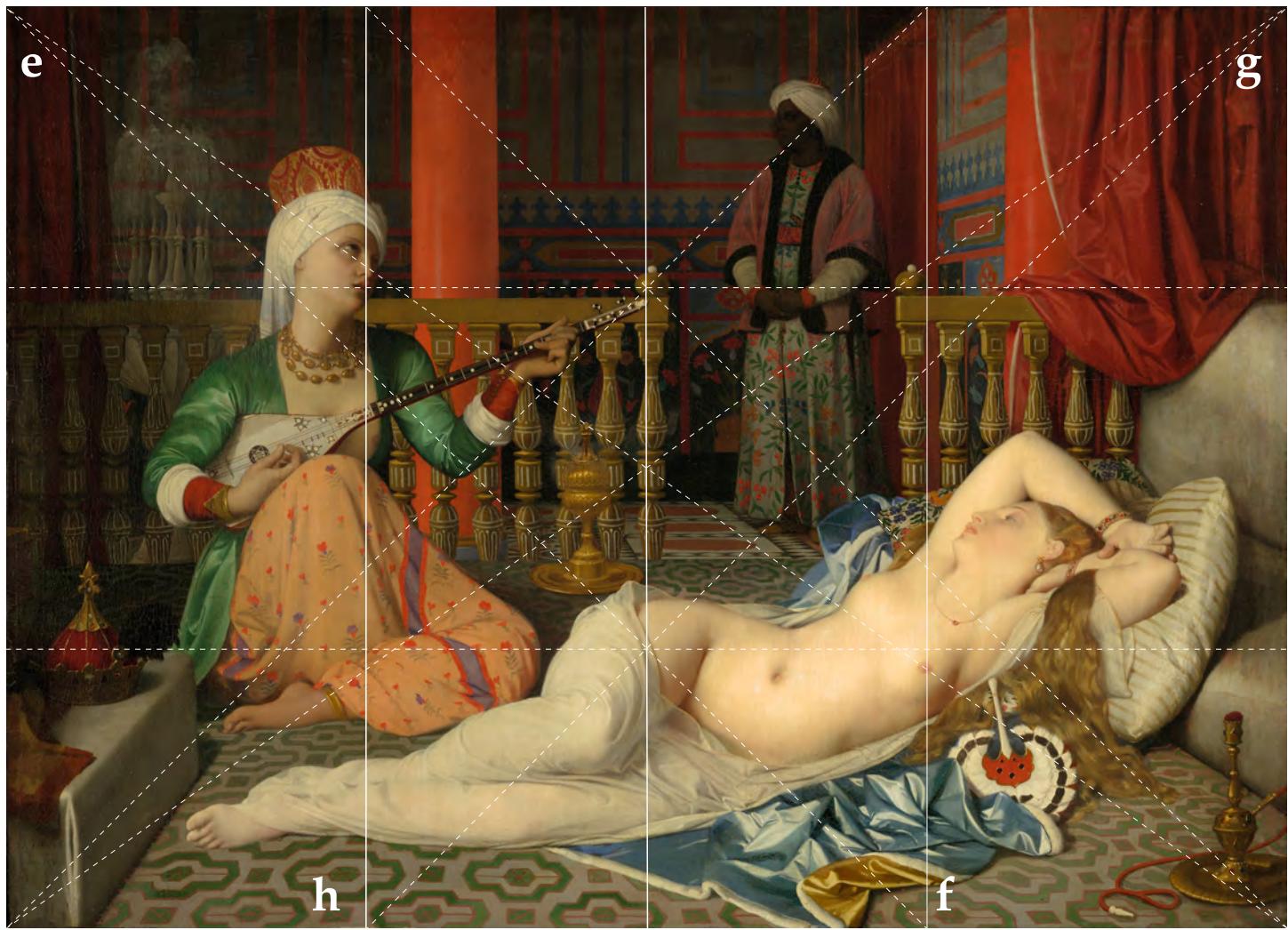
Before proceeding I would recommend printing out the original image in black & white, grabbing a basic geometry set, and following me step-by-step.



The secondary diagonals are the Rabatement diagonals. **ab** & **cd**.

Note the placement of the baluster (the balustrade knob) at the intersection of both Rabatement diagonals.

A horizontal line is rendered at the same intersection point.



The second set of lower Rabatement diagonals, **ef** & **gh**, are drawn..

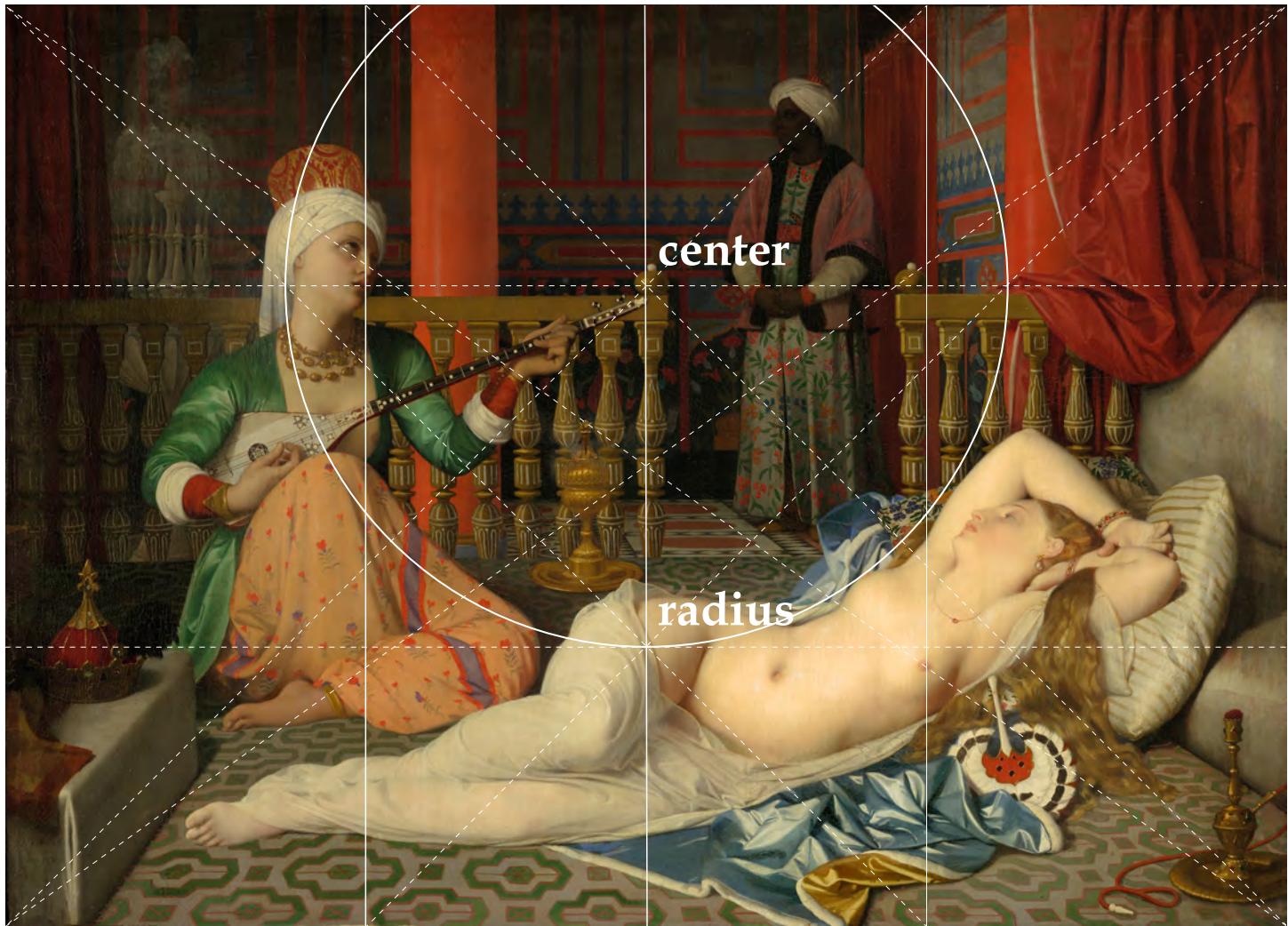
The drapery cascading over her thigh is fixed at the intersection point. Another horizontal line is rendered at this intersection point.

Ingres is constructing his armature, the framework, vis-a-vis the Rabatements, primary diagonals and rabatement diagonals.

These are the basics. The foundation of a painting's framework.

Allow me to digress for a moment: There is a bit of nonsense floating like malevolent dust faeries about the supposed Rule of Thirds. It is a bastardization of dynamic symmetry.

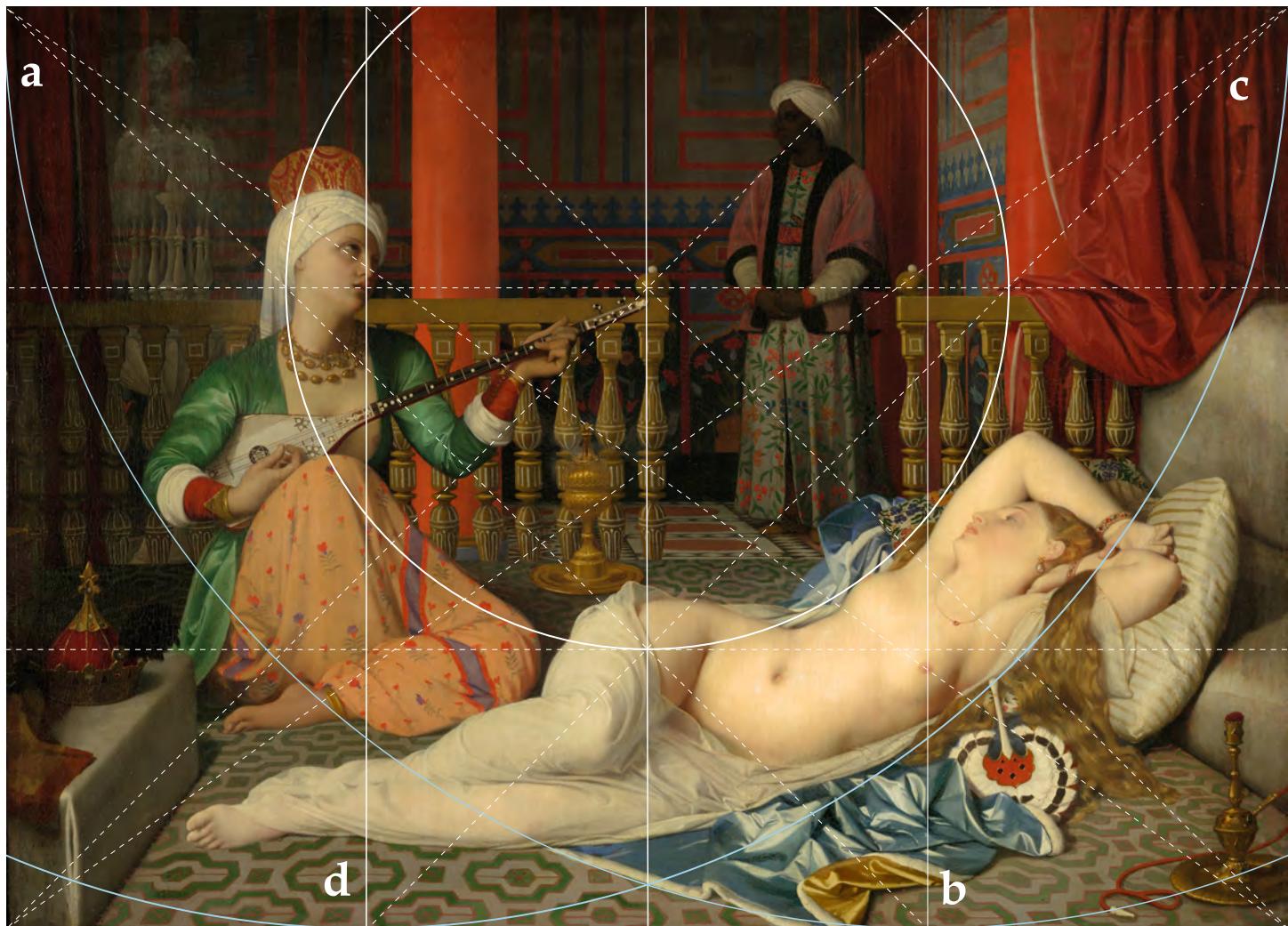
A good rule of thumb is: Every expediency, or short cut, significantly degrades your art. Do the work and stick to the program. Once the fundamentals are mastered then you can embark on painting with an economy of means which is painting at the highest level.



Now that the armature is established it's time to rock-n-roll!

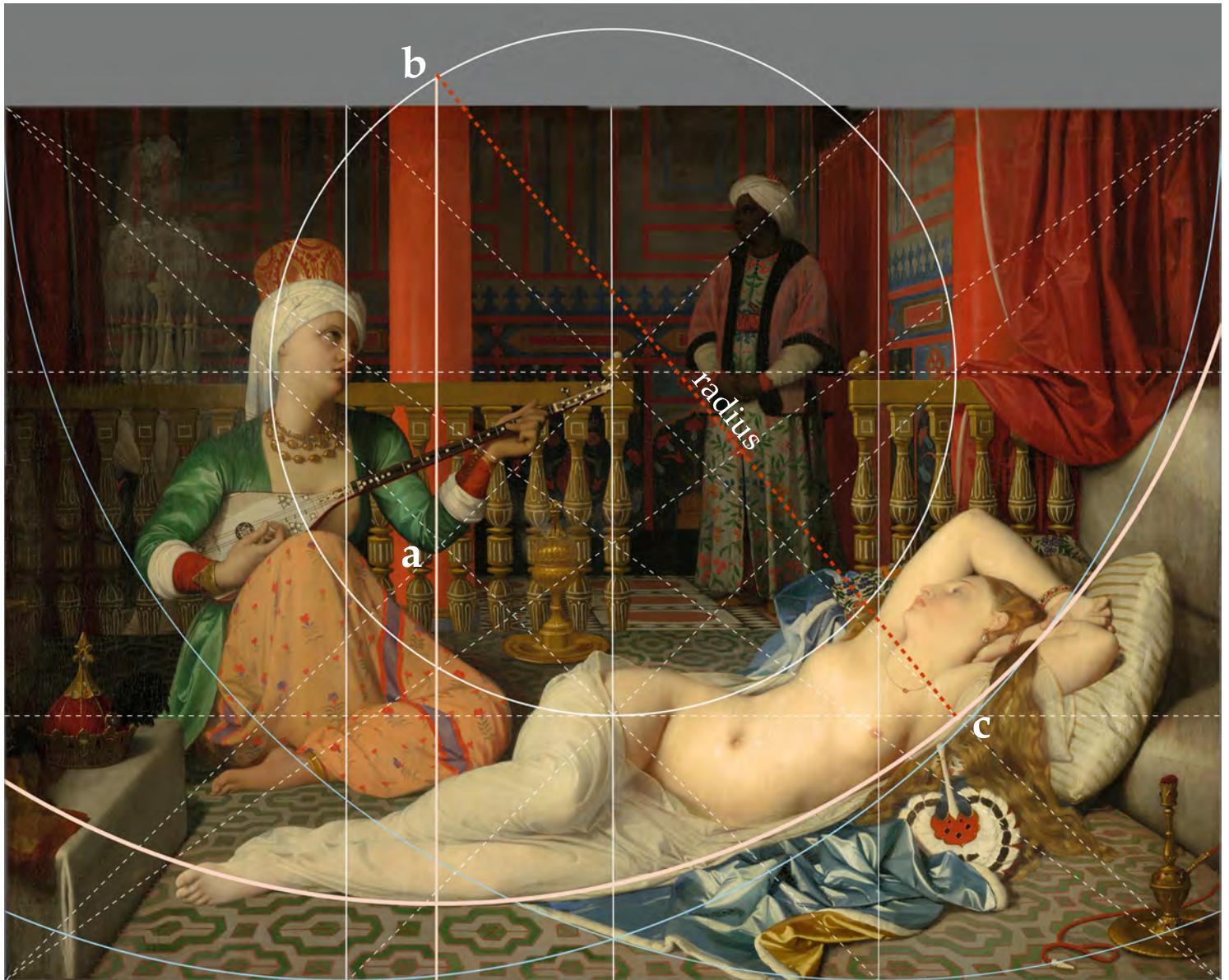
The composition infers, strongly infers, a clockwise dynamic. The circle defines the interior movement.

The intersection points of the armature are the nuts and bolts of the composition's erector set. The **center** of the circle is the balister (at the intersection of the upper rabatment diagonals). The **radius** is at the intersection of the lower rabatment diagonals.



The swooning, swooping lower Rabatement arcs, **ab** and **cd**, pair the odalisque and slave into a unified geometric coupling. Note the placement of her robe nestled upon the arc. And the slave's forearm.

The upper Rabatement arcs yielded nothing of interest. I left them out.

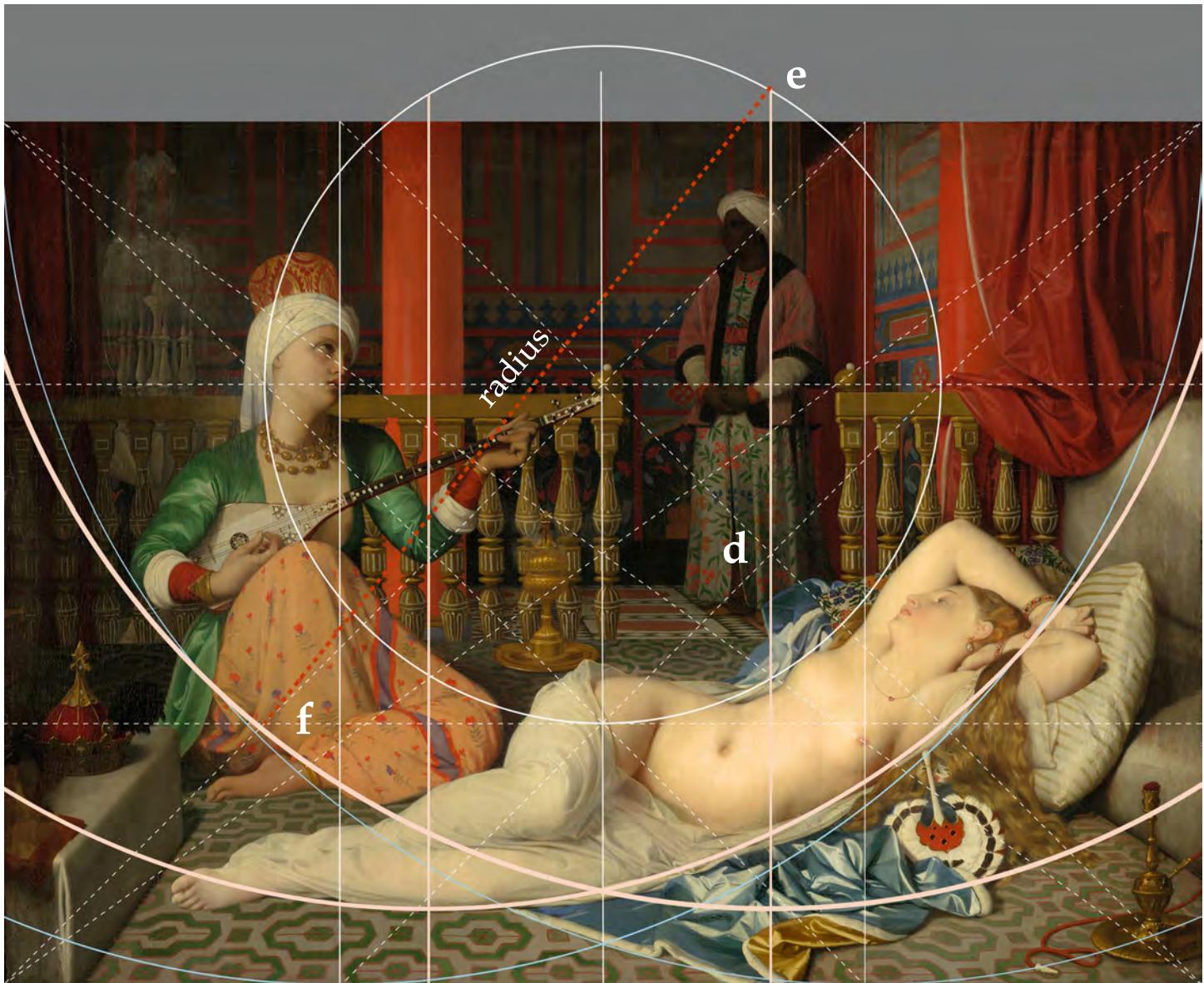


We now graduate to advanced dynamic symmetry.

Every painting demands its own solution. Invoke a sense of play as you explore the innumerable possibilities. The inviolable rule is the erector set: intersection points are the base rationale, the nuts and bolts. The exception would be if you're a mathematician or engineer, then you could probably teach me a thing or two.

If your solution is beautiful you'll feel it. So will the viewer. If your solution is ugly and awkward—well, ugly is ugly. Nothing worthwhile comes easy.

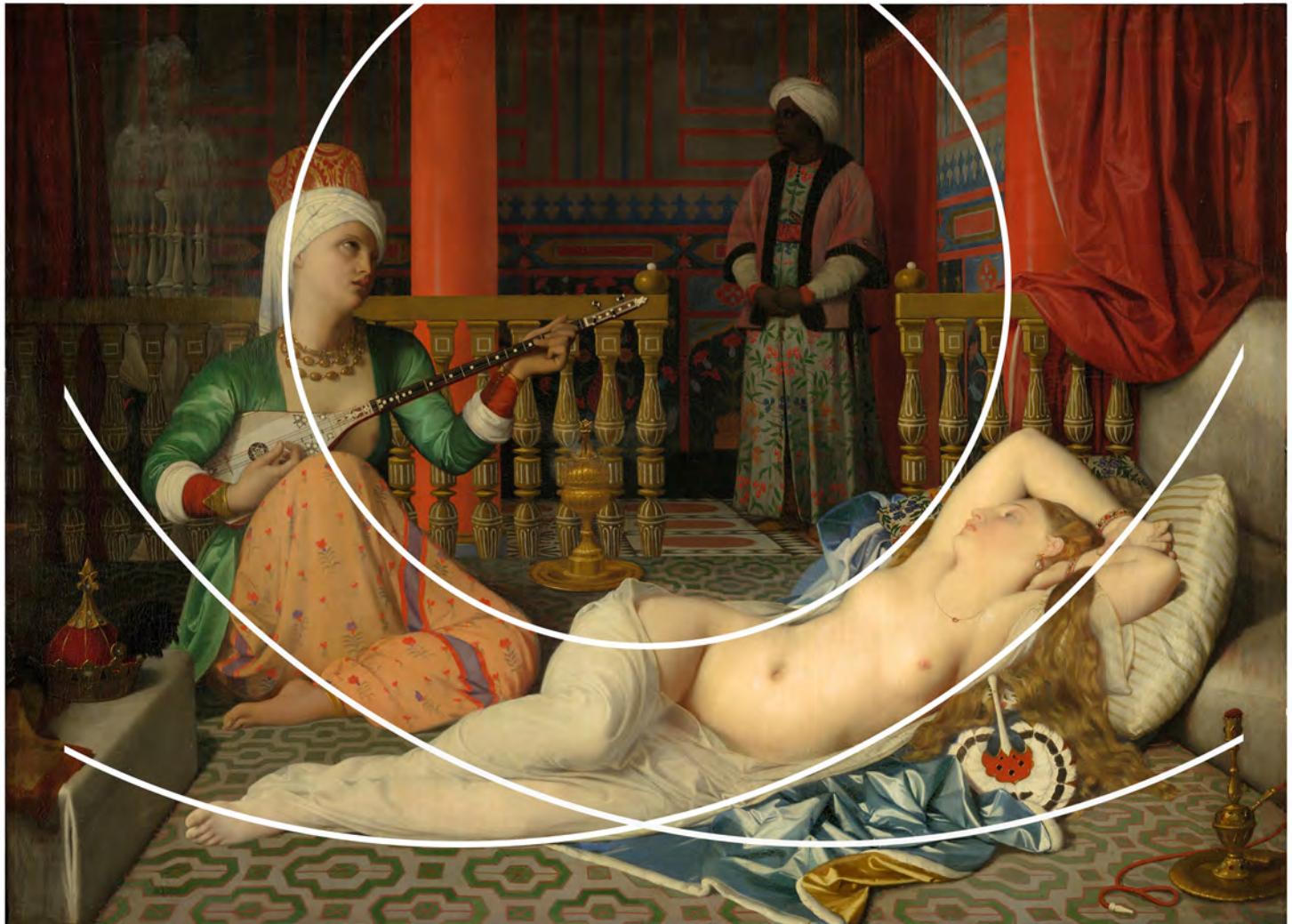
From **a** (intersection of rabattement diagonals) a vertical line is rendered upward to the circumference of the circle **b**. A radius is rendered from **b** to **c** (intersection of the lower horizontal line and the rabattement diagonal) and the resulting arc encompasses the odalisque.



The process is repeated ...

From **d** (intersection of rabatement diagonals) a vertical line is rendered upward to the circumference of the circle **e**. A radius is rendered from **e** to **f** (intersection of the lower horizontal line and the rabatement diagonal) and the resulting arc unites the slave with the odalisque.

And thus are the keys to the kingdom of making good paintings.



Stripping away the armature the result is the synthesized construct of what engages and delights the viewer's unconscious mind.

Narratives change and evolve. Usually for the better, but not always. What remains, however, is the architecture that carries the message.

Which brings us to the extraordinarily strange, utterly compelling portrait of Mme. Caroline Riviere.

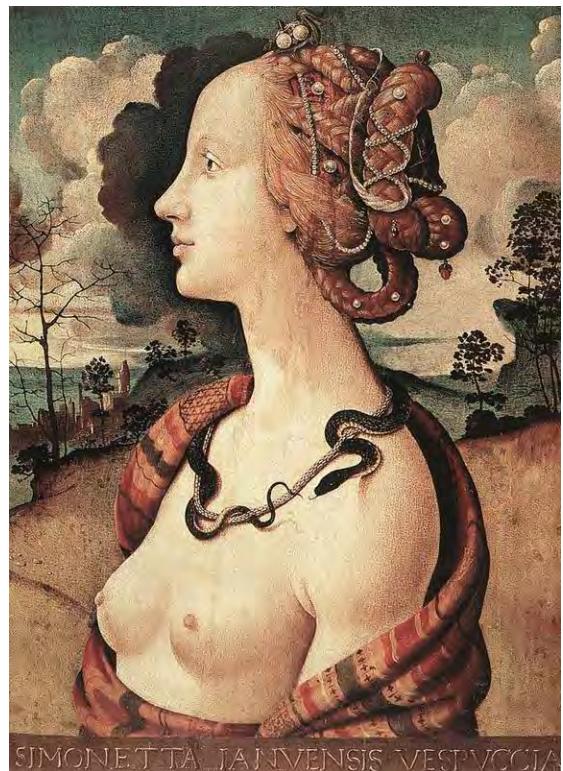
Ingres' mastery of the harmonious power of dynamic symmetry explain the both the anatomical distortions of Caroline and the perspectival distortions of the picture plane as if we were viewing her through an aspheric convex lens.



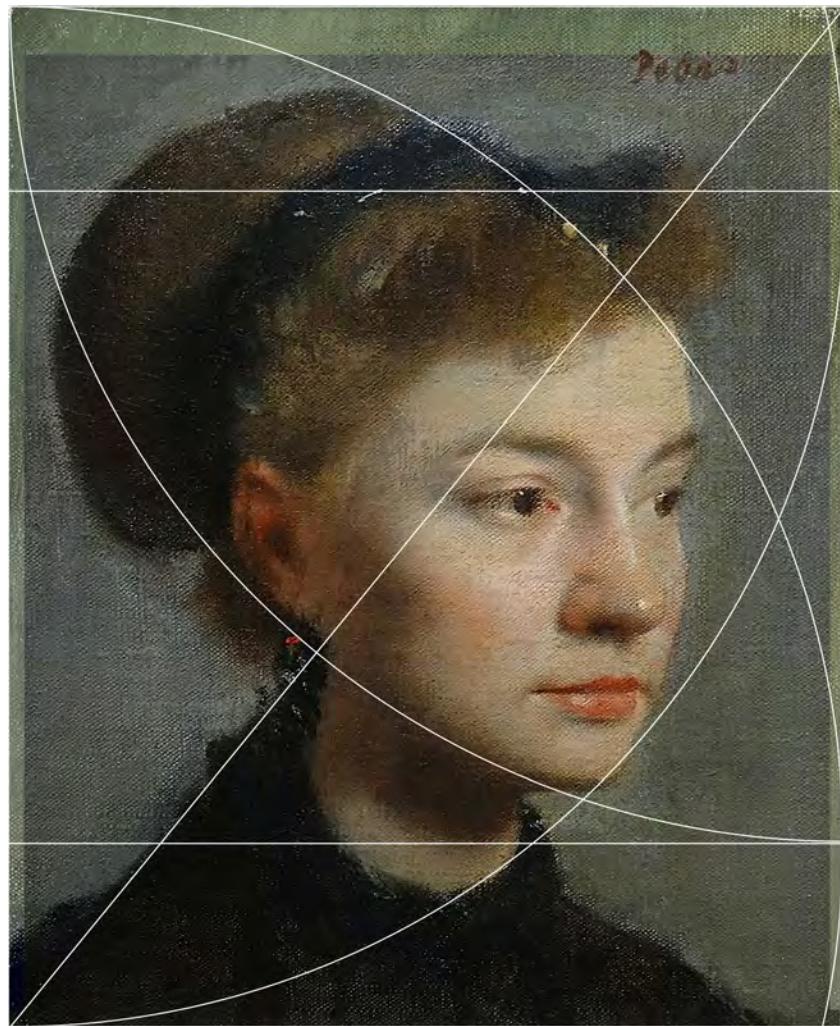
Painted in 1805 and measuring 39 x 48", *Caroline Riviera* is believed to have been informed by the Renaissance artist, Piero di Cosimo's *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci*, circa 1480.

Alas *Caroline Riviera* did not receive the warm embrace of public adulation that Ingres hoped for. The critics savaged him for the anatomical distortions and the gothic sensibility ... and ... and ... that serpentine boa conspiring to relieve young Caroline of her innocence!

Long before Ingres was lauded as France's greatest living artist he bore the umbrage of France's most loathed painter.



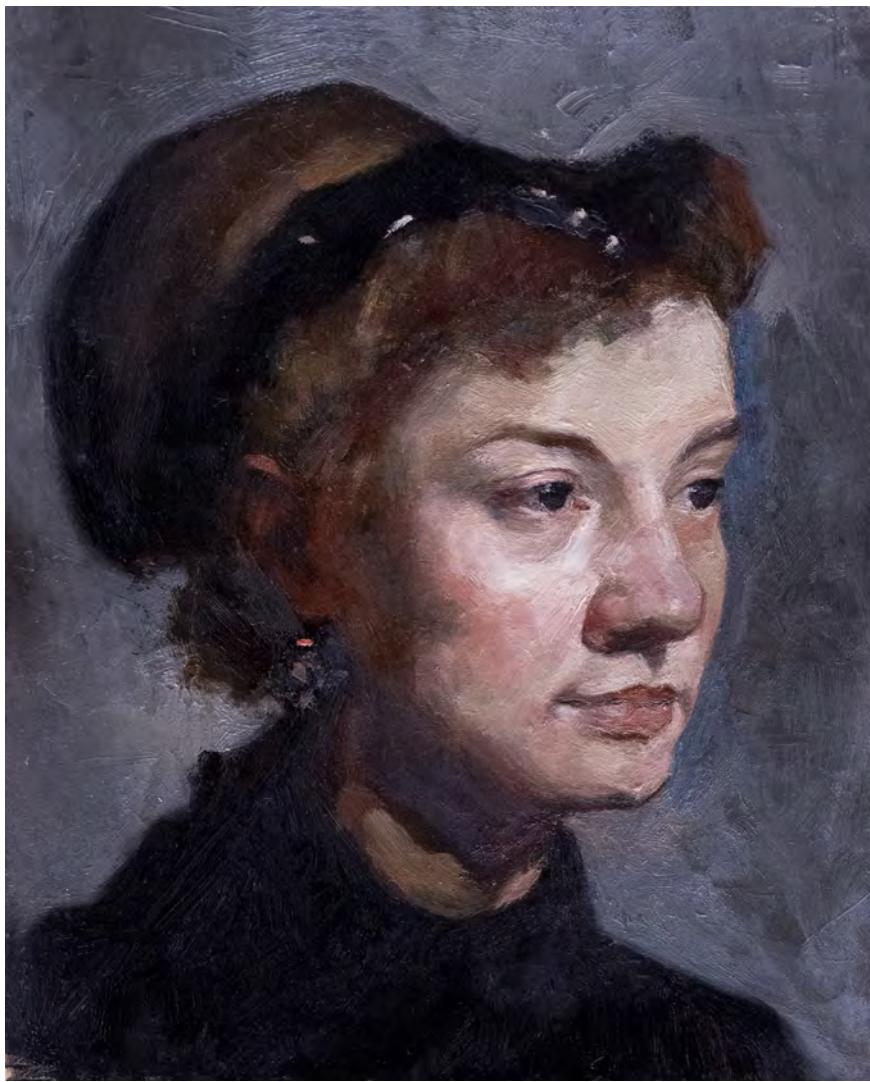
SIMONETTA VESPUCCHIA



There is a jewel-like quality to Edgar Degas' *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1867. The young woman is Emma Dobigny—one of the three preferred models of the Belle Epoche: Manet's muse was Victorine Meurent, the other was the Italian Agostina Segatori, a short-lived lover of Van Gogh. It seems Vincent wasn't as lonely as the myth implies.

This is a small painting, measuring 22 x 27 cm. I reconstructed the painting to its original dimensions. I really wish museums would not crop their images. It's probably a copyright and licensing issue.

I've distilled Degas' geometry to its final synthesized architecture—two overlapping rabatements and their respective arcs.



Degas' portrait is much, much more than a head plonked down upon the canvas. Thousands of equally well-drawn and painted portraits were produced in the latter 19th Century, but very few match the beauty of this simple portrait.

Ah ... simple. Simple in and of itself is meaningless. A simplicity rendered through a wall of complexity, well, that is something else entirely.

It is through this wall of complexity (the geometry, the fractal recursions and dynamic iterations) that I endeavor to discover in my copy of Degas.

It is important to note that you cannot draw the portrait through dynamic symmetry. The purpose of dynamic symmetry is to establish the harmonious divisions of space within the canvas.

I've taken a few liberties. Degas' portrait is rendered on a rough textured canvas prepared with a light imprimaturi of vertical ochre strokes. There is discrete evidence that he carefully drew out the portrait with a graphite pencil. I might be wrong on that, but I don't think so.

Despite my scurrying about the bowels of the Louvre I could not find a study for this painting. However, I did source this abandoned self-portrait drawn on stretched jute linen that illustrates how Degas began a painting. Albeit in the early 1850's. This is how Degas was trained.



Practically every academy today offers the same curriculum as that of L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. There is a term for this: institutional isomorphism.

Academies look to and copy each others' curriculum. The result of this mimickry is that the academic mode of training (namely Jean-Léon Gérôme and his disciple Charles Barque) become taken for granted as the correct and legitimate one.

Well, here's the abridged history of how this sorry state of affairs came to be.

In 1982, New York businessman and art collector, Stuart Pivar and Andy Warhol set up the spanking new New York Drawing Association in the malodorous (primarily cat urine) basement of the Middle Collegiate Church on Second Avenue in the then very gritty and dubious lower east side. The life drawing sessions were free. You only had to risk getting mugged and/or raped to get there. I remained unscathed. Our small group was the hardy pioneers of the rebirth of realist figure drawing and painting in America.

Stuart is a tall, lanky man with considerable charm but a somewhat obsessive personality. I liked him. He was my benefactor providing me a full scholarship for several years. Stuart was also a major collector of Bouguereau paintings. If you've ever wondered why the [Art Renewal Centre](#) and many academies (particularly the ARC accredited academies) orbit their idol Bouguereau ... money talks.

The Drawing Association became the New York Academy of Art outgrew that dank basement and moved to the more genteel Lafayette Street. Alas, happy times never last. Internecine strife broke out. Senior faculty were shown the door. And a host of new instructors emerged. Some excellent, some were frauds.

A new board member joined the roster: Jeffrey Epstein. Fresh hunting grounds for Ghislaine. And disingenuous offers of scholarships and study trips to Europe.

Andy Warhol died in 1987. He bequeathed the New York Academy of Art a handsome sum allowing them to purchase their current studios on Franklin Street, Tribeca, NYC.

Stuart Pivar's association with the academy concluded somewhat dramatically in 2000. He was ignominiously expelled during the annual 'Take Home a Nude' benefit gala and frog marched out the door. 'And don't come back. Ever!' were probably the last words hurled at Stuart.

Let's move on ...

Whereas there are many roads to Rome they all require the ability to draw. And the foundation of drawing is striking shape.

Figure drawing is rendered from the inside out; first establishing the gesture and contrapposto of the hips and shoulders and weight placement. The portrait is constructed from the outside in beginning with the overall shape of the head.



My copy is the same dimensions as Degas' 22 x 27 cm. Curiously it is a single, lonely centimeter shy of being a $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle (The square root of the golden rectangle.). Degas choose wisely cropping that centimeter.

The more you work with dynamic symmetry that more finely attuned your sensibility becomes.

I am working on panel with an imprimatur of red ochre tinged with a touch of terre verte and applied in an abstract expressionist manner. This activates the surface, giving it energy.

The practice of copying is not to produce a faithful replica but to extract what you need to further your understanding of painting.

There are two paths to choose from: the **illustrative** which is coloring in a resolved drawing (the academic teachings of Gérôme and Bargue) and the **plastic**. [The plastic construction of form which was the practice of John Singer Sargent].

I prefer Sargent's practice. It proffers a greater presence and materiality than the illustrative. Degas, of course, was the exception. But he did progress far from the merely illustrative. Gérôme did not.



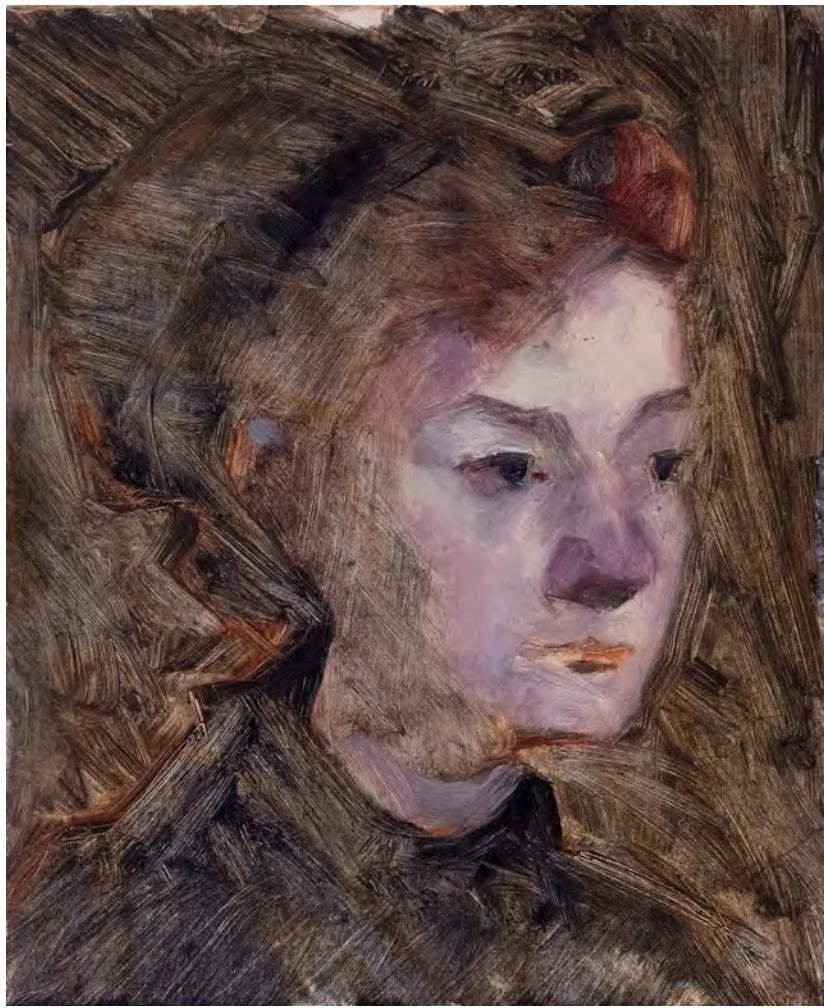
Whichever avenue you choose to pursue the foundational skill you must acquire is the ability to strike shape. I call this **striking the arabesque** as it implies rhythm and gesture. Terminology implies intent.

This 23-minute 4K streaming video from **Portrait Painter TV** teaches you how to strike and refine the arabesque. It's a free lesson that will propel your art forward significantly.

You can also sign up for a free two-week trial of Portrait Painter TV. I'll notify you two days before your trial ends. After that it's only \$17/month.

Download the reference image and ideally print at full-size (22x27cm):
<https://www.artacademy.com/Striking-January-2026.png>

Unlike Degas' possible preparatory pencil drawing I struck the arabesque with sanguine conté fitting it within the architecture of the geometry.



I paint with a sculptural sensibility, utilizing the materiality of paint as diction. It contributes heavily to a painting's presence.

This initial stage is the *ébauche*, the so-called dead coloring-in.

Once the ground (the background) is initiated and the hair and overall dark pattern established I 'serve up the half-tones in the abstract.' Those are Sargent's words.

My palette is limited to four colors: flake white, yellow ochre, indian red and ivory black.

Three half-tones are prepared: a light, a warmish middle light and a warm dark light.

The *ébauche* is also about strategy. Render your initial tones a little

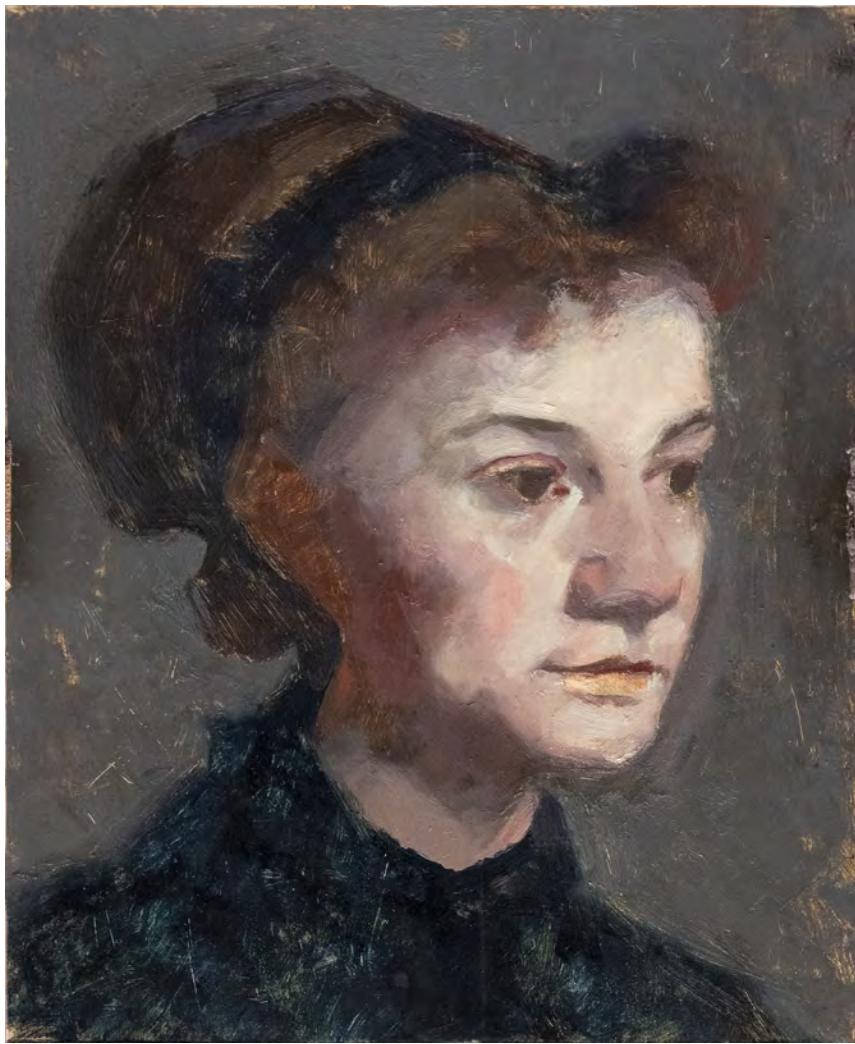
warmer and darker than the final intent. It is much easier to lighten a value than to subsequently darken it. Glazing will not save you.

The planar structures are tiled broadly as if I am plonking down, pushing and pulling colored clay. It is important to look past the facial features. Almost every beginning artist draws and paints feature centrically. That is a sure road to ruin.

It is near the conclusion of the *ébauche* that I take my first stab at the gaze. More likely than not, the irises will be slightly misplaced. But it is a starting point.

The mouth is left alone. It is the singularly most difficult facial element to fix. A mere millimeter misplacement will skew the expression. The horror! The horror!

Leave it until you have more information.



As the painting progress I constantly refine the arabesque. It is that important—the big shape is the fulcrum of both the composition and the expression.

My palette is expanded to its full array of nine colors including vermillion and prussian blue. Plus calcium carbonate which is both an extender and a rheological stabilizer of the the paint. I prefer a stiffer paint and the calcium carbonate (available in better art stores) allows me to adjust the stiffness of the paint to my liking.

With brush, knife and fingers I model the facial forms with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical forms. It is very much a tactile/sculptural process.

Simultaneously the range of cool and warm values are instilled. Scant attention is paid to the features. The bulk of the work is developing the planar structures of the face.

My foray into the mouth has immediately resulted in a drawing error. Damn it all! The upturned tick of the commissure changes her expression completely. That will demand my rapt attention quite soon.



There are many ways to paint. In realist painting the two primary avenues are the **illustrative** and the **plastic**.

The end result depends heavily on the route taken and is wholly the subjective timbre of every artist.

The illustrative delineates form. It is where most beginning artists begin.

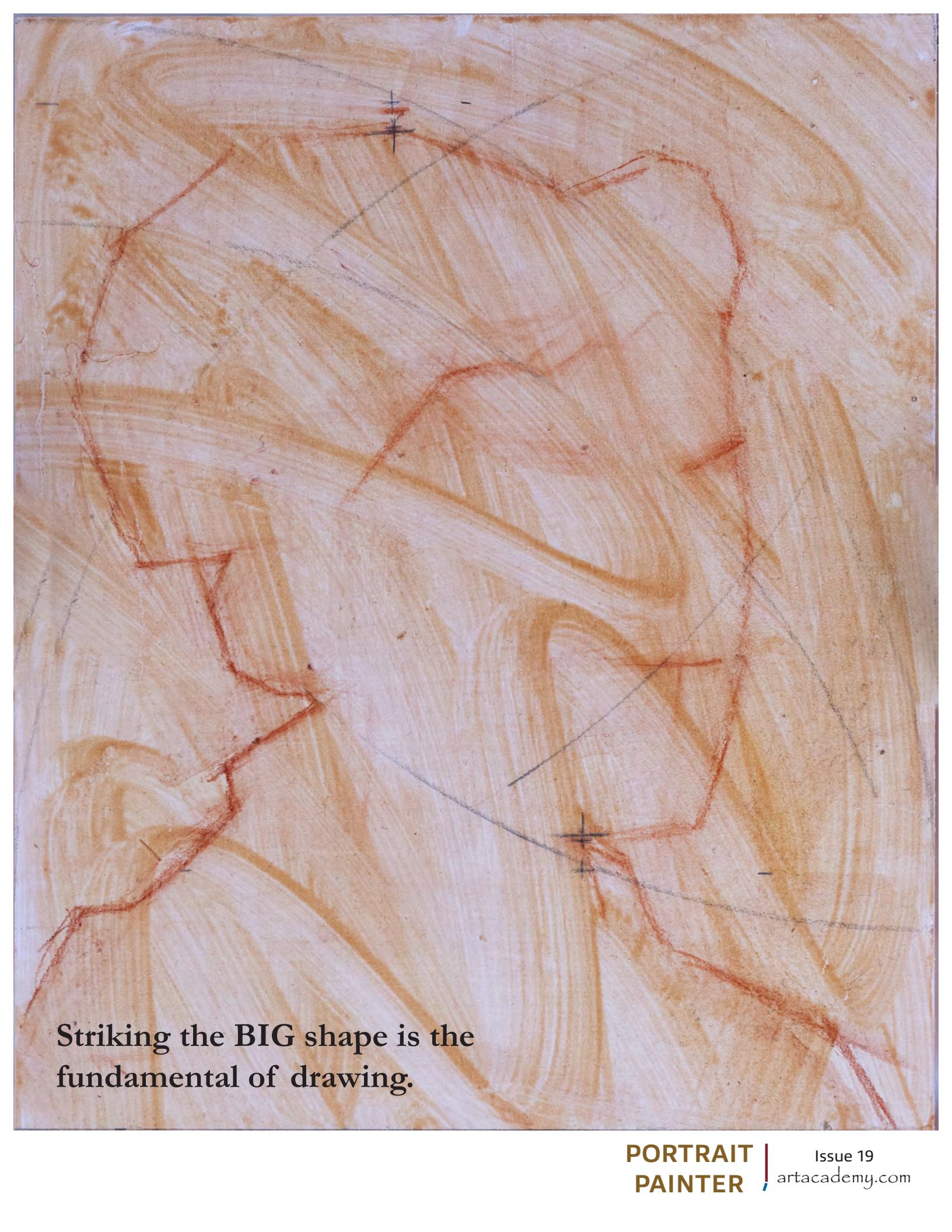
The plastic utilizes the materiality of paint as diction wherein paint is given meaning through both its layers, its scar tissue—remnants of myriad corrections and change of direction—and its abstract structural surface of fractal recursions and dynamic iterations.

No matter which route you take the foundations of drawing and painting, namely shape, remain the same.

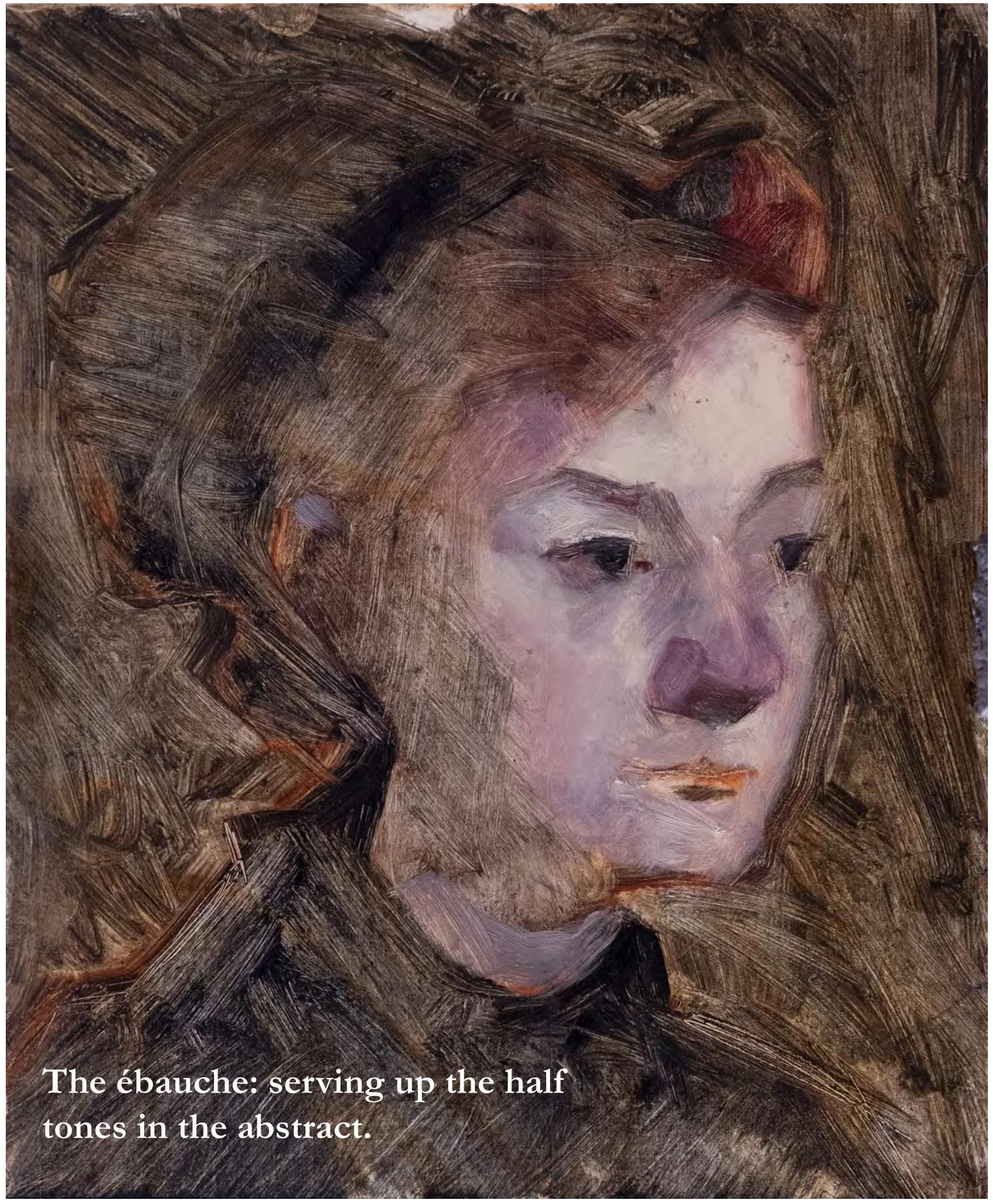
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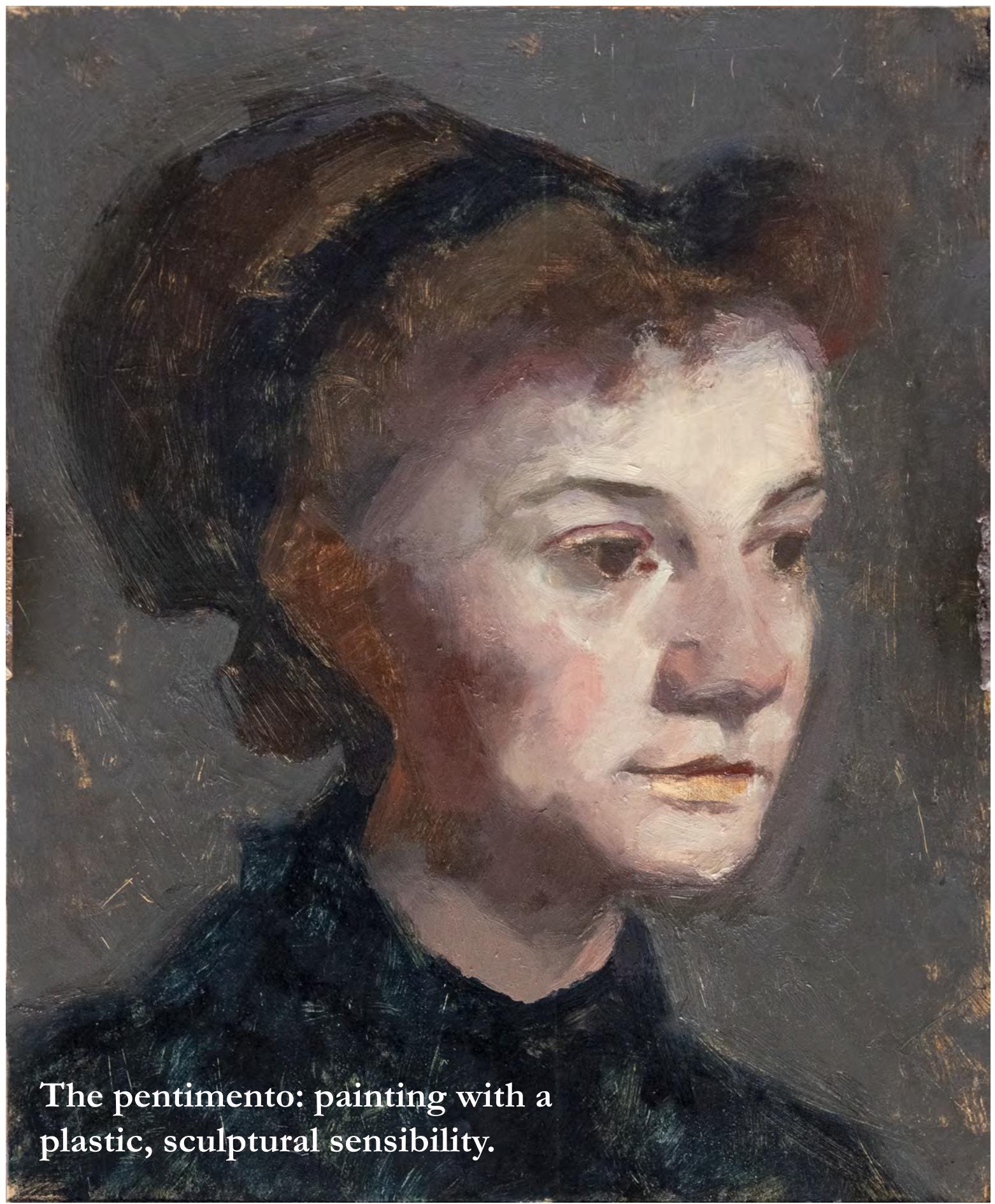




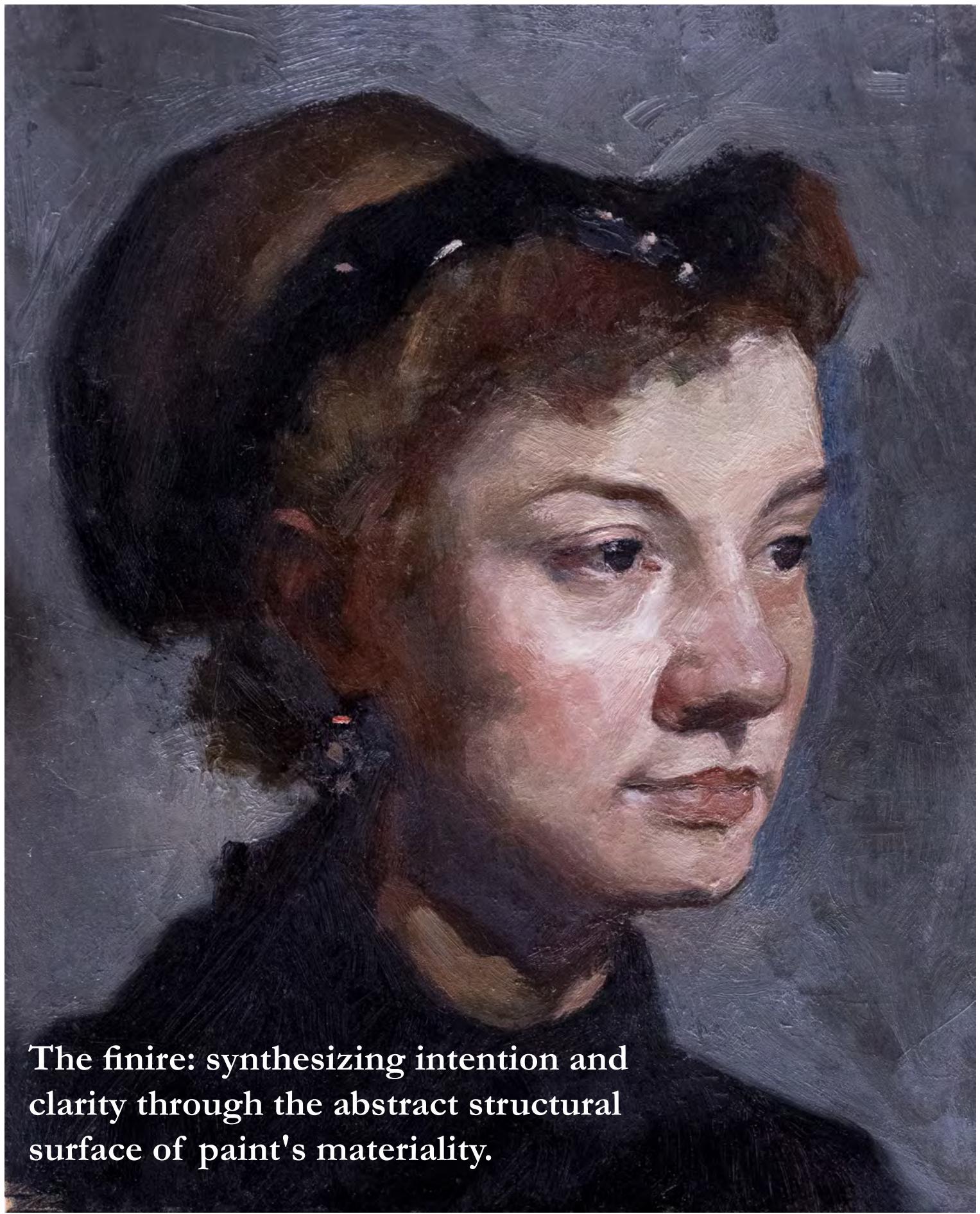
Striking the **BIG** shape is the fundamental of drawing.



The ébauche: serving up the half tones in the abstract.



The pentimento: painting with a
plastic, sculptural sensibility.



The finire: synthesizing intention and clarity through the abstract structural surface of paint's materiality.