



July 2025

PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the July 2025 issue:



Painting Alla Prima. A FREE HD video workshop.



Abstract structural surface | Expression

A Word ...

The July 2025 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER continues with alla prima portrait painting.

Written especially for the dedicated portrait painter who prefers the quietude of the studio to the throbbing mass of flesh-seared crowds gathered at a littered sea shore I am rewarding your studious diligence with a free, HD download video workshop in two sessions.

Session 1 presents the under-structure of alla prima painting.

Session 2 (to be released in the August issue) presents the practice of bravura brushwork applied with a sympathetic correspondence.



Michael Britton
July 2025

A Illa Prima—Going Rough

A tronie is an informal character study whose appeal often lies in the material exuberance of paint veiled with a touch of melancholia. Think of Frans Hals, Velazquez' court jesters, and Sargent.

More often than not it was a tronie that drew you into the fold of portrait painting. The best are painted with a beguiling effortlessness, snatched from the teeming mob of humanity and bestowed with an engaging empathetic singularity of spirit.

A successful tronie is built upon the ruins of many failed paintings. There's no way around it. The painting game depends on acres of canvas to nourish a few excellent works. Alas, technical wizardry alone is not enough; nor will erstwhile emotive out-pouring manage a striking work. A balance needs to be found. And every painting determines its own metric.



Michael Britton, *Henry*, Oil on canvas,
11x14", 2025

And then there is the political veil. Like it or not, all art is political. So, too, the prosaic chore of accounting the household budget. It's inescapable.

Here I knowingly, and warily, tread into the morass of a nation riven with solitudes of grievances and resentments. Your art will always reflect your world view. And that can either reward you or damn you depending on how things turn out. Time is a flat circle afterall.

My intention for the July issue is to utilize the clichéd imagery of the Native American and somehow, someday, find an inflection point that would twist it inside out vis-a-vis flying-by-the-seat-of-your pants alla prima painting. There is nothing new under the sun, art making is often a re-interpretation infused with one's world vision.

Underpinning all good art is sound structure. The narrative requires a cohesive infrastructure. In painting this is your layer cake of pictorial divisions, drawing, Notan, color and the abstract structural surface of the paint.

Painting alla prima demands a solid structural beginning otherwise the painting will collapse into an unholy, muddy mess. Your structure begins with striking the arabesque, the singular big shape that determines the gesture and likeness.

Whether one calls it the contour, mapping, outline, etc., I much prefer the term **striking the arabesque**. It implies both rhythm and gesture. Terminology implies intent.

It goes without saying that acquiring the skill of accurately striking is the solid grounding of your fundamentals. Everything builds upon that. Yet, decade after decade far too many students resist this. Sargent's students, too, skimmed over acquiring this critical skill of which Sargent complained ceaselessly.

Let me tell you a story. Tragic but true. As a socially awkward adolescent, newly arrived in New York City in the early 1980's, I signed on for an ongoing course at the Art Students League on West 57th Street. The instructor was a name-branded, celebrity of sorts. Competent but overwhelmed with a class of sixty students spread over two studios. The tuition was cheap and you get what you pay for.



Painting alla prima demands a solid structure. There is scant time to be fiddling with drawing issues.

Once the BIG shape, the arabesque, is struck and quickly verified for accuracy it is a matter then of deconstructing that initial strike into smaller shapes. Like a jigsaw puzzle.

I paint with a sculptural sensibility carving out the basic blocks of facial form with brush, knife and, if called for, fingers. It is a process of spotting color value notes as if they were colored pieces of clay.

Ensconsed within the tightly packed mangrove of easels and decrepit taborets and zealously guarding their prized spots were students who had been studying and painting at the league for decades. A few, even, since the end of the Second World War.

To my horror—ohh the horror! the horror!—not a single one had progressed beyond that of a beginner. They seemed happy enough earnestly slapping paint onto canvas and chatting amiably with their coevals. But for \$55 hard-earned bucks a month I wanted more than a paint-smeared social mileau.

One dark and stormy night, wandering about this esteemed institution I chanced upon a skeletally attended class. Only six students! if that, studiously striking rectangles and shapes from templates pinned to the wall onto plexiglass and then verifying how well they did before wiping clean their plexiglass and beginning anew.

Simultaneously appalled—\$55 to draw bloody rectangles!—and curious I enquired with a strangled squeak what this was all about. Striking was the answer. 'Ya wanna paint like Sargent? Ya gotta do what he did. Strike! Strike! Strike! Do the work! And what's wrong with your voice?'

Needless to say, I ponied up another hard-earned \$55 and joined that studious coterie of striking apostles.

Within less than two months I learned to strike shape with a laser precision. And it served me well over the intervening decades of painting. Still today I will spend a few hours each month grease pencil in hand and a sheet of plexiglass perched upon my easel. Yes. Striking is that important.

There are two means of painting portraits alla prima: from the outside:in (painterly) or the inside:out (illustrative/academic). One works; the other doesn't.



I like a stiff paint fortified with calcium carbonate. There is a fearless quality to it that regards any attempt at feeble illustrating with disdain.

Paint like you mean it. Art does not reward the timid.



Thomas Eakins, Head Study, 1873

In my experience plonking down beginning artists before a live model to paint an alla prima portrait invariably results in an unholy incubus of mangled paint wrought upon a despoiled canvas.

It is far, far better to study and understand facial structure from a well-resolved drawing. Thomas Eakins' drawing of a profiled young woman fits the bill nicely.

From this elegant drawing an alla prima portrait painting will be pulled in my upcoming two-session Zoom workshop beginning Tuesday, July 15 at 18:30 PST.

Write me at michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com for all of the info.

I don't know about you, but the thought of spending a hot, humid holiday weekend perched on a sole-scalding beach packed tightly into a madding mob of greased and burnt flesh swilling warm beer and munching on charred and dessicated hot dogs served up with a heaping salmonella seasoned portion of potato salad holds precious little appeal for me.

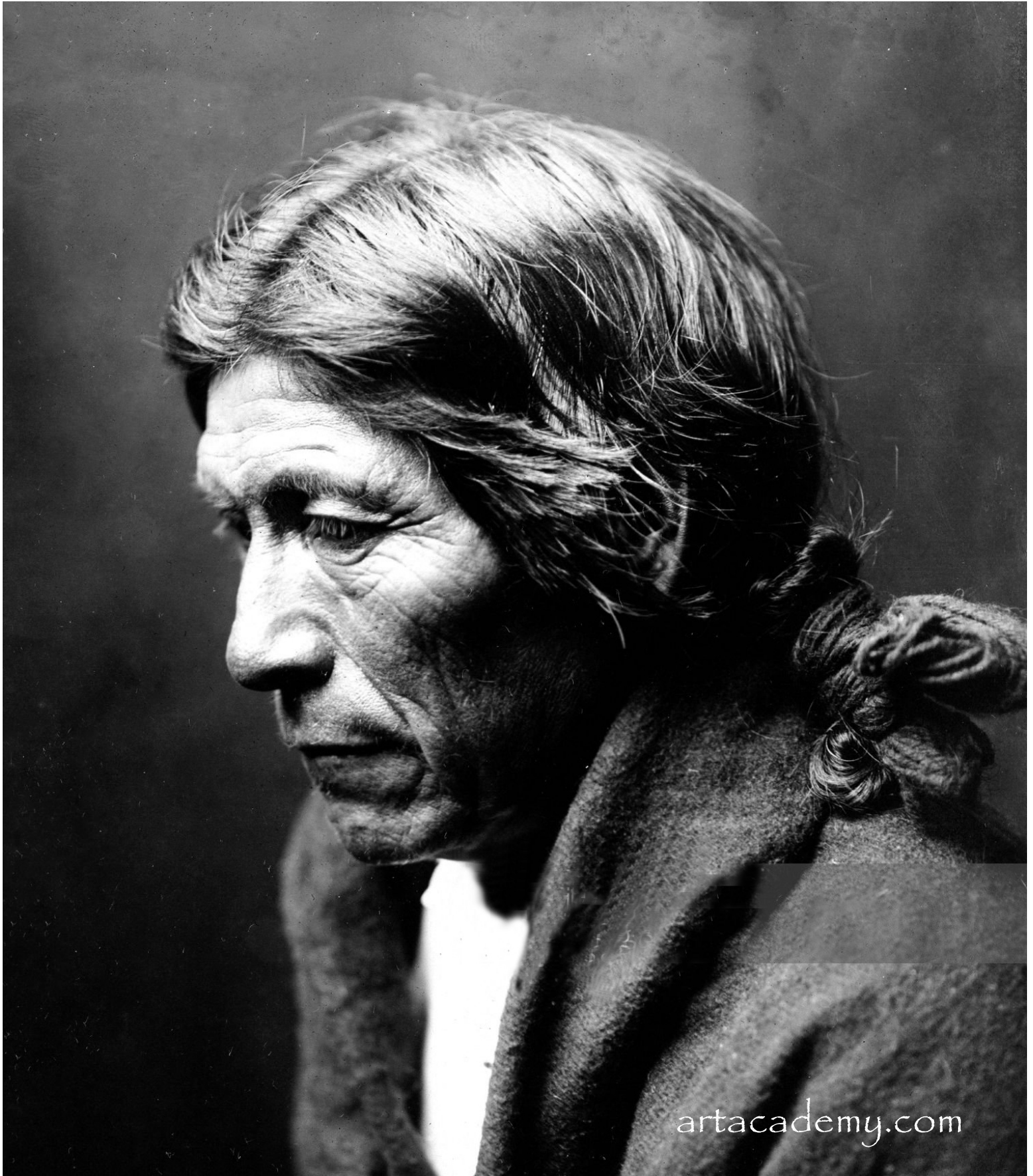
I'd rather be painting.

In the curmudgeonly spirit of holiday retreat and respite I give you Session 1 of my recent Alla Prima workshop presented in three unabridged parts in HD resolution. You'll need to download these files. They're too big, too high resolution for streaming.

I'll release Session 2 in the August issue.



Painting the Alla Prima Portrait: [Part 1](#)
[Part 2](#)
[Part 3](#)



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Drawing into Painting: Learning to Paint Alla Prima Portraits

The singular determinant of a successful alla prima portrait painting is STRUCTURE. Everything else follows.

Structure begins with striking the BIG shape thus establishing the gesture and foundation for the likeness with a few deft strokes. I'll teach you this critical skill.

From the big shape the primary planar structure is blocked-in paving the way toward a solidly grounded portrait.

To get directly to the root of understanding structure in portrait painting you'll be working from master drawings by Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent.



This will teach you to see past the surface details into the building blocks of facial form.

Utilizing a restricted palette of four colors you'll learn how to efficiently mix flesh tones.

Once the structure and planar elements are established our palette is expanded to its full range and the portrait is expressively resolved with brush, palette knife and the occasional finger applied with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical forms thus rendering a 3-dimensional alla prima portrait that is as fresh as hot biscuits!

The workshop is presented in two 2-session modules which are designed for both the beginner and those seeking to strengthen their skill-set.

Module 1: Thomas Eakins (American 1844 - 1916)

Eakins was trained in Paris under the tutelage of Gerome, the foremost academic painter of the late 19th Century, whose teachings influence most ARC-accredited academies today.

From this elegant profile drawing you will develop, step-by-step, an alla prima portrait painting whose process is presented in two sessions.

Tuesdays, July 15 & 22
18:30 - 21:00 PST
\$197

Module 2: John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)

Sargent, too, was trained in Paris but his teacher, Carolus Duran, stressed a freer, painterly approach that was diametrically opposed to the illustrative, academic method of Gerome.

Employing Sargent's expressive charcoal portrait of 'Mary Smyth Hunter' as a foil, we, like Sargent, will begin with striking the big shape with a few deft strokes of charcoal before 'serving up the half-tones in the abstract' (Sargent's words).

The facial forms are then extrapolated via spotting color/value notes with an economy of means wherein the portrait emerges. This is the essence of bravura painting.

Tuesdays, July 29 & August 5
18:30 - 21:00 PST
\$197

REGISTER FOR BOTH MODULES FOR ONLY \$320. (And save \$74)

For more information and to register write me at:
michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com



Michael Britton, *Parrot Head*, Oil on Panel, 35.5 x 30cm, 2025

Artists tell stories. Our syntax is paint. Paint advances the narrative.

Although it is ill-advised to paint with a pre-conceived idea of how the painting will turn out it is advisable to paint with ambition: To push your boundaries.

Paint without limits. Once you've acquired your foundation it will always be there. There are no secrets in painting: either you can draw or you cannot. Either your painting is built upon a solid under-structure or it collapses. Either your brushwork is confident and knowledgeable or it is tentative and timid.

My ambition for alla prima portrait painting is to be as direct and fresh as I am with an en plein air landscape. Providing that the spirit of the painting is strong and engaging small drawing errors can be forgiven. Sometimes a clumsy coda of color can be as charming as heck.

As a painter and teacher I don't believe there is a 'right' way or a 'wrong' way to paint. Either a painting works or it doesn't. Albeit, having your foundational skills under your belt ensures a solid stride. But there is a caveat here: technique is important, but beware of losing your art in the pursuit of technical excellence. Technicians are not artists.

Take risks. Break away from the crowds. There are magnificent vistas to be discovered.