






PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the March 2024 issue:

-  Velázquez
-  James~Painting African-American
Flesh Tones
-  Finding the Edge

A Word ...

The March 2024 issue of **PORTRAIT PAINTER** features the illusionist master Diego Velázquez. His genius significantly informed Impressionism and subsequent schools of painting.

Step-by-step I examine and copy his portrait of El Nino, an entertainer of the Spanish Court.

Also in the March issue is my process of painting James, a young African-American ensnared in dismal Lanett, Alabama.

Understructure features 'Finding the Edge': A study of the Italian painter Morandi whose employ of geometry created paintings that hum with kinetic energy.

Plus a bit of a shocker that'll rock your world (maybe I'm overpromising here): Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, 1889.



Michael Britton
March 2024

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold'

William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919

Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez



Velázquez, Self-Portrait, c. 1640

October 1918: Six hundred years of squabbling family rule came to a sudden, ignoble end. The once great, once dominant Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and disappeared. With nary a peep nor a blink of a gimlet eye, the Habsburgs bid adieu. They exited stage-right, world history stumbled and then staggered like a mugged drunkard toward the sorry state of affairs we all endure now.

The Habsburgs' annelida grip knew little bounds. They leeches and bled white the Americas with guns, steel and smallpox and settled their familial disputes with constant internecine wars and military campaigns.

The Spanish Empire was a corporate division of the Habsburgs. The Google to its parent, Alphabet Inc.

Empires, like people, are never satisfied for long. The more you make, the more you spend, the more you need. That is the nature of money.

It goes without saying in certain social circles that money be kept in the family—*ut in familia*. The Habsburgs thought it a brilliant idea to concentrate their obscene riches by marrying and procreating with one another. Gouty uncles and prepubescent nieces, reluctant brides dragged, howling protests like incensed cats, onto bridal beds. Happy uncle, happy wallet.



The Habsburgs, the ruling German-Austrian dynasty stretched from Portugal to Transylvania and across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the Philippines. The Habsburg jaw, a protruding lower jaw (mandibular prognathism) and bulbous lower lips, grew more pronounced with each succeeding inbred generation, culminating in Charles II, the hexed one, who could not close his mouth, amongst a litany of health and mental issues.

Left: Philip IV by Velázquez

Right: Charles II by Juan Carreño de Miranda

Generation upon generation of untoward familial conjoining manifested in both physical and intellectual decadence culminating in Charles II, the idiot king, a quasimodo, who ascended the Spanish throne at the tender age of three. The few remaining strands of empire soon raveled (A side note: **ravel** means the same as **unravel**).

Let's step back from this tawdry tableau lest I digress further and lead us all to tip-toe through the tulips and irrevocably down the garden path.

*

Come the early 1600's the Spanish economy was in a shambles. It was hollowed out—too much Aztec and Inca gold chasing too few goods to spend it on—and inflation soaring at times to over 1500%.

Velázquez' training began early. He didn't learn much from his first teacher, the volatile Francisco de Herrera, other than to duck a fist and slip a whipping with a rod. That horror show ended when, at age eleven, he was accepted into the studio of Francisco Pacheco, the most celebrated artist/teacher in Seville. Pacheco, an undistinguished painter, was possessed with a wealth of theory and practical solutions to painting problems.

After six years of study in the 'gilded cage of art' Velázquez was certified as a master painter of images in oil.

You are not supposed to say this ... well, it never stopped me before ... but from the evidence I will venture to say that Velázquez was not preternaturally gifted. *The Portrait of a Man*, c. 1622, painted when Velázquez was twenty-three exhibits many of the issues that bedevil beginner and intermediate painters. The portrait is feature centric. Too much emphasis is placed on those over-sized, awkward eyes and, horror upon horror!—Geez! Really, Diego?—the mouth has slipped the facial angle. A common rookie error after twelve years of study.



Velázquez, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1622

I say this not to diminish Velázquez but to point out that his fundamental skills were acquired through work and perserverance. Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses. A good teacher will buttress your weaknesses and preserve your strengths. Alas, too many academies today are sausage factories; cranking out superb technicians while murdering the artists within.

Come 1623 Velázquez hit the painter's jackpot! Philip IV, a mere eighteen years old, almost six years Velázquez' junior, took a liking to Velázquez and appointed him the official portraitist and chamber painter of the Royal Court.

Admittedly, Pacheco pulled a few strings beseeching Count-Duke of Olivares, the puppet master of the Spanish Empire to smooth the way for the young Velázquez.

It was a stupendous gig that not only paid a respectable salary—albeit the same as the Royal barber, alas, painters were considered no better than brutish tradesmen like blacksmiths—and a pension. Plus a slave to attend to life's prosaic and soul-crushing errands. Imagine that! Every painter should have a slave. Velázquez chose to keep the slave he had inherited, Juan de Pareja, a Moor who also painted and whom Velázquez graciously tutored.



Peter Paul Rubens after Titian, 'Portrait of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor,' 1603

Yet, frankly, Velázquez was still a provincial minded painter.

A wondrous alchemy manifested in 1628 when the most famous artist in Europe, Peter Paul Rubens, came on a prolonged visit, ostensibly on a trade mission for the Flemish Court, but also to study and copy Spain's magnificent collection of Titians.

A bromance ensued. Rubens opened Velázquez' eyes to the manifold possibilities of painting—kind of like getting music lessons from John Lennon. Rubens impressed upon Velázquez the need to go to Italy and immerse himself in the triumphs of Italian painting. More strings were pulled and Velázquez merrily ensconced himself in a Spanish galleon, his Italian venture fully funded by Philip IV. I doubt that Velázquez suffered in the sweltering, tubercular version of 17th Century economy class lugging a greasy backpack stuffed with moldy laundry and a granola bar.



Michelangelo Merisi de Caravaggio (1571-1610) had an outsized influence on Velázquez. Left side: Velázquez, *The Triumph of Bacchus (The Drunkards)*, 1628-29. Right side: Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1596

For almost eighteen months epiphany upon epiphany showered Velázquez like a passel of colicky pigeons. He assiduously copied Tintoretto in Venice, Raphael and Michelangelo in Rome. And Caravaggio, the rapsallion, the murderer, the procurer of rent-a-boys, thief and one of the greatest of painters had a heavy influence on Velázquez.

Much to Velázquez dismay he was eventually summoned back to dreary, Inquisition shackled Madrid, albeit a very much changed man. The genius of Velázquez awakened.

Nigh twenty years later Velázquez embarked on a second trip to Italy; a shoppin spree for Philip IV to acquire paintings and sculptures for the Spanish Palace. A painter, now at the majestics heights of painting, he had scored the commission for Innocent X's Jubilee portrait.



Left: Velázquez, Juan de Parejo, 1650
Right: Velázquez, Innocent X, 1650



Popes then were not the amiable fellows that lounge redolent upon the fisherman's perch today. Innocent X was a shrewd politician and woe to whomever got in his imperial way. His involvement in the English Civil War remains felt in the everlasting tribulations of the besotten, rat-arsed [Kudos to J.P. Dunleavy, 'The Ginger Man' 1955, for that memorable description.] emerald isles.

Few foreigners have ever been granted the honor of painting the Pope. That fact was not going to stymie Velázquez.. He refused to not toady up to this rather frightful and malevolent old man.

On this second trip Velázquez was accompanied by his erstwhile slave Juan de Pareja. Amongst Juan's mundane duties—securing tour tickets, restaurant reservations and the occasional mistress (he sired an illegitimate son, Antonio, whilst in Rome—Diego, not Juan!)—was to pose for a rehearsal painting. Yes, even a great painter like Velázquez felt it wise to rehearse and sharpen his skills!

Velázquez painted Innocent X as he saw him: a suspicious and venomous potentate. His fingers drumming an impatient pitch.

Surprisingly, Diego wasn't excommunicated and bundled back to Spain in chains to eternal damnation and a hostile panel of Inquisitors post-haste at the unveiling. Innocent X initially declared the portrait *tropo vero*, too true. But he eventually grew fond of it and found it useful to hang in the papal visitor's waiting room. The better to intimidate pesky petitioners.

*



Velázquez, Portrait of Philip IV, 1652-3

Royal portraits are often dull affairs. That was the law, no monkeying about with smiles and tell-tale gestures.

Philip IV was a lonely guy who ascended the Spanish throne at sixteen and was immediately ensnared by the Rasputinesque Count-Duke of Olivares, a puppet master extraordinaire, twenty years Philip IV's senior, whose minions scoured the sun desiccated plateau in search of randy milkmaids, desperate to escape their rural confines and the withering gaze of priests and uncles, to entertain the lonesome adolescent king.

Well, need I say more? Of course I do.

Philip IV was as charming as cold, rancid fish for breakfast. He quickly grew bored with his libidinal toys and banished them to the gloomy ossuaries of remote nunneries. There would be no manic songbursts atop dewy alps for these cast-aside lasses.

Painters were not held in high esteem by the Spanish nobility. Painters were considered, tolerated at best, as per-

snicketity tradesmen, only a notch or two above carpenters. But that probably depended on whether or not you needed a new armoire to house your sartorial splendors.

Imagine the chattering of the palace courtiers when Philip IV would saunter into Velázquez' studio for an afternoon of chit chat. He even had his own kingly chair. I doubt very much that that chair was like the wobbly, paint splattered contraption upon which my studio guests perch.

These chit chats were akin to the President of the United States sauntering into the kitchen scarfing a Snickers bar to watch, critique and chat with the plumber whilst the world, as always, was going to hell.

Let me tell you ... it's pretty hard to really become engaged in a painting while entertaining a voluble and melancholic guest.



Juan de Pareja, Self-Portrait, 1661

And when your guest is the boss bad things have a way of presenting themselves: One horribly fateful day such a bad thing did happen. I guess Velázquez was working on some background passages and Philip IV, bored out of his nut, was idly poking about when he espied a canvas turned to the wall.

'Golly, I haven't seen this one before,' he may have thought and, like a Netflix pre-view, turned it around to take a gander.

Alas, for Velázquez, it was a head study painted by Juan de Pareja. Philip IV was so struck by Juan's painting that he demanded Juan be freed. Immediately!

'Que!?' Velázquez may or may not have uttered.

'Damn it all! First he drinks all of my finest wine and then he frees my slave!!'

And thus Velázquez was remanded to washing out his own brushes uttering many an ungentlemanly Spanish oath.



Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. An incredibly complex work of shifting planes and focal points that somehow all come together in a unified whole. Great art defies analysis. The meninas are the Infanta (bequeathed to Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor) Margarita's maids of honor. Margarita died at 22 years. Consanguinity.

Men of Pleasure

Hombres de placer, men of pleasure, lent a carnivalesque otherworldliness, a crucial counterpoint, to the rigidly codified social structure of the Royal Court.

These 'others' provided both entertainment and a stern warning of God's providence. This was, after all, the prickly realm of the Spanish Inquisition.

Velázquez' informal portrayals allowed him unfettered reign to paint as he chose to paint. The genius of Velázquez manifested in the 'other'.

Composition was a strategic tool for Velázquez in motivating the viewer to experience his work as it was intended. Diag-



Velázquez, *The Buffoon Calabacillas*, 1635-39



onal structures, complex focal points, and separate planes manipulate the viewer's eye to spur a deeper understanding of the picture.

The portraits were intentionally painted out of focus to express life and movement and to blur the boundaries of temporal flesh.

Velázquez' use of extra-long handled round brushes facilitated this effect. When I begin a painting, striking the initial shapes and gestures, I use a #24 Escoda Chungking extra-long (60cm) handled filbert (4535). Unfortunately they don't make rounds. Expect to pony up \$100 per brush.

Getting used to painting with a long-handled brush takes some practice; its benefit is that the greater distance from your canvas allows for both a freer and more accurate striking of the arabesque.

There is no greater learning tool than studying the unfinished works of a great painter. It is often the beginning of a painting that determines success or failure. Unfortunately there are no unfinished Velázquez' that have survived the feral ravishings of time.

We can, however, glimpse clues of Velázquez' thinking process. Even in the later passes of the *Pentimento* (intermediate painting stage) Velázquez would reconsider the rhythms and gestures. In *Portrait of a Girl* the fall of the ruff was reconsidered with a sanguine red.



Velazquez, *Portrait of a Girl*, 1640



The offending passage, on close inspection, appears to have been scraped out. One, that's you!, should never blighly paint over offending passages. Scrape it down with your palette knife.

Referencing a B/W x-ray radiograph of Velázquez' *Innocent X* and colorizing it using Photoshop's AI capabilities I endeavored to render the image to what the painting may have looked like at the first pass of the *Pentimento*.

There is no evidence of a preliminary drawing. What is evident is that Velázquez built up the facial forms with a sculptural sensibility. He was not simply copying (illustrating) his sitter. He



employed pigment, the yellow ochre/lead tin yellow tinted lights buttressed with chalk and quartz, as if they were clay.

And as was Velázquez unfortunate wont the mouth, again!, misplaced.

No argument here as to whether the papal collar was reconsidered. What is curious, however, is that it appears that stack white was used for the redrawing of it.

Stack white is made from lead rods suspended over horse manure and allowed to curdle into white flakes. It would have been Juan de Pareja's job to attend to the gathering of the white flakes. There are marks that you can make with stack white, which, rheologically, has an exceptionally long tail, that cannot be achieved with lesser pigments. Good paints, like good ponies, have long tails.

The Boy from Vallecas, Francisco Lezcano, 1638

Francisco is holding a pack of cards, inviting any rube who might dare to be cheated of a few coins. He is informal and relaxed, possessed of an attitude that would be unthinkable in a portrait of any other sort of person. His casualness belies a cheeky fellow.

He was born afflicted with a thyroid deficiency (cretinism with oligophrenia) that significantly impacted both his physical and intellectual capabilities which, given the less-than-enlightened timbre of the times, the palace found amusing. But better than the alternative of being abandoned in a midden.

Velázquez' treatment of Lezcano's head and hands are breathtaking in the seemingly casual rendering of facial forms, executed with an economy of means achieved by very few painters. Every brush stroke is rendered with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical forms.

The gaze and undercarriage of the nose are articulated minimally, yet convincingly. And, here, Diego has nailed the mouth firmly to the cross: an intriguingly mocking invitation to try your hands at cards.

I, for one, would decline for fear of losing my lunch money.

A subtle expression is the devil to paint; an hesitant and excessive description will transform a friendly laugh into the hideous guffaw of a sociopathic felon.

John Singer Sargent, who was highly influenced by Velázquez, stressed to his students that in order to fully understand the modelling of the head is to paint it omitting the facial features. Every student is feature centric. So, too, was Velázquez. Refer back to his early *Portrait of a Man*, 1622.

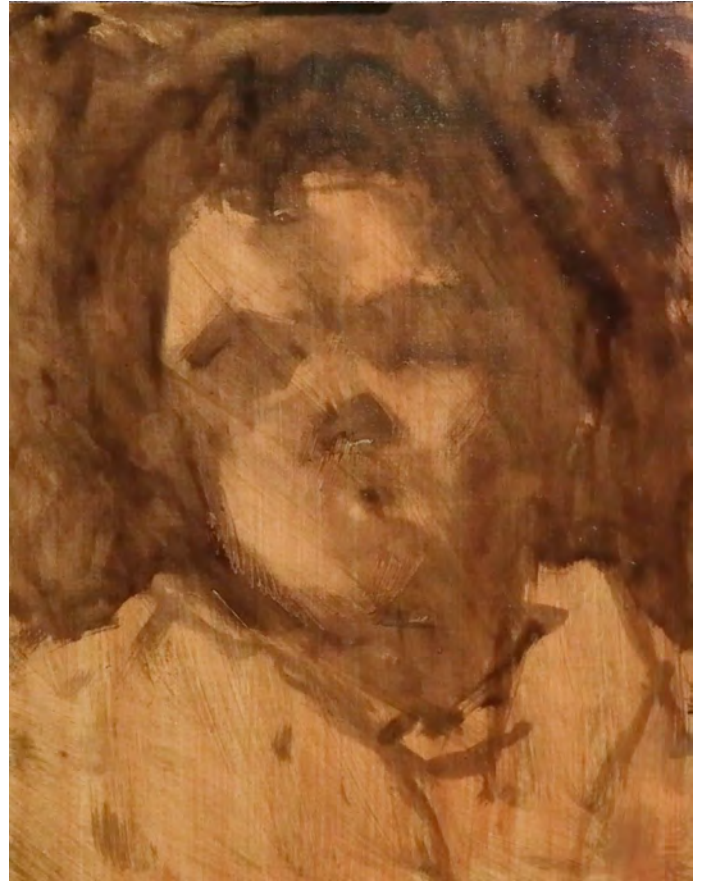
Like Velázquez, look deep past the facial features and into the underlying planes and structures that comprise a head. Therein lies truth and the likeness in all of its manifestations.



Beginning Lezcano—the ébauche

The beginning of a painting often determines whether it will be a success or not. On the one hand the drawing must be reasonably accurate, at least within 90%, and on the other you mustn't be so concerned with the drawing that it inhibits the spirit. Technique should be the liberator of compelling expression, not a shackle that suffocates and procures timid and tentative work.

The first, and most important, task is to strike the large shape, the arabesque, of the head. This is where both the likeness and expression reside. Accurately establishing the arabesque—how high, how wide and the angles—is an acquired skill. Once you have acquired that skill door-upon-door is flung open allowing entry into the more wondrous modes of painting expression.



First things first: Learn to draw with the brush and forego the preliminary drawing (the cartoon). Unless you are beginning a compositionally complex work which dictates unforgivingly precise placements, using a preliminary drawing often leads to a coloring-in process of painting which in the end results in a skillful illustration but lacks an armature to give it substance.

Paintings are felt more than they are seen. A compelling painting stays with the viewer, an illustrative work is a tourist on a day trip.



Striking shape is an acquired skill. Begin with a simplified shape and draw it to the same dimensions as the template (as shown here on the right) on a sheet of tracing paper. You can then assess your strengths and weakness by positioning your drawing over the template.

Once the arabesque is struck, only a few succinct lines are required, the blocking-in of the overall light/dark pattern is effected. Train yourself to see through the eyes of a sculptor; paint as if you were modeling in clay slapping and pushing the elements into position. If you make a mistake a rag, a finger, a stiff brush anointed with medium, will readily rectify your crime.

The common advice given to beginners is to paint and model form from dark to light. The perfidy! The perfidy! This is the blind leading the blind, inevitably stumbling into the abyss.

Begin with the half-tones. Mixing flesh tones is also an acquired skill. Learning is a step-by-step, layered approach. With a palette of four colors: white, yellow ochre, a sanguine red and black mix a rudimentary array of three half-tones: a cool light, a middle light and a warm dark light.



A general rule of thumb for the ébauche is to render the half-tones a little bit darker and warmer than what they initially appear. Even when the paint is dry it is much easier and more effective to lighten and warm a passage than it is to subsequently darken and cool it.

Should you need to later darken a passage glazing is not your savior. Not at all. You need to first scrape out the offending passage with your palette knife. Vertical scraping will also somewhat flatten the form. And that's a good thing at this early corrective stage. And then make your correction(s).

An inviting trap is to color-in the head. Yes! That infernal, damned illustrative approach that like your friendly neighborhood serial killer whispers soothing entreaties ... It's OK ... relax ... shhh ... before relegating your once promising painting to the coroner's austere laboratory of horrors.

Upon your palette you have three values, three colored batches of clay. Again, see through the eyes of a sculptor; peer past the facial features deeper into the structure of the head. Determine the planar aspects vis-a-vis the skull.

And like a sculptor plug those pieces of colored clay into their respective positions.

In painting this is the practice of spotting color value/notes. This is the practice of Velázquez; this is the practice of Sargent; this is the practice of Rembrandt. Ad nauseum.

Spotting color/value notes has a simple hierarchy of criteria: 1. Select your value; 2. Place it using both vertical and horizontal plumbing; 3. Shape it. And best to shape your notes so that they have a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying structure. That's the skull.





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Pentimento

From the Italian *pentirsi* comes Pentimento meaning 'to repent'. Penance invariably demands that all of your measures be double-checked. We all have our biases: slanting things too far to the left; the facial angle that invariably drifts to the center; brow lines that creep up, etc., etc.

I use a wooden stylus to inscribe pinpricks to establish, re-establish, my landmarks. The stylus is also quite useful to scratch out the placement and shape of critical lights, such as the left-side eyelid in the first pass of the Pentimento.

It usually takes two passes of the Pentimento to build up the facial forms, working from general to specific. My color/value notes become more precise as I push and pull the paint with a sympathetic concordance to the anatomy and expression.

My palette is expanded to nine colors including lead tin yellow and vermilion. In the academic literature you will read that Velázquez used Naples Yellow. Perhaps, perhaps. But it would be an unnecessary addition to his palette as Naples Yellow is readily mixed with flake white, yellow ochre, a touch of lead tin yellow and a micro-dose of ivory or vine black.

This is true for many of the colors smartly presented on the art store's rack. Most hues can be mixed from a rudimentary palette. However, there are some colors that you will need to pony up your Visa for: cerulean blue and cadmium orange come to mind. True, you can whip up an orange but it is a finicky color that quickly looks dirty. Like that orange couch in your accountant's office, perhaps.

My working palette for flesh tones is: flake white, lead tin yellow, yellow ochre, vermilion, burnt sienna, venetian red, terre verte, raw umber and vine black. On those days when I have squeezed out the last grains of terre verte while waiting for replenishments to arrive, a workable green can be rendered with yellow ochre and black.



The beginning painter is well advised to spend the necessary time learning how to mix color. Flesh tones are generally neutral tones that lean either toward the warm or cool spectrum. From a base of white/yellow ochre/lead tin yellow (or a pale yellow) and a micro-dose of black a range of flesh tones can be made from varying quantities of burnt sienna and terre verte.

As the facial forms progress from the cool lights to the middle warms vermilion does the job nicely. Cadmium red is too harsh, too garish. The dark forms invariably pick up some of the background color particularly in the reflected lights.

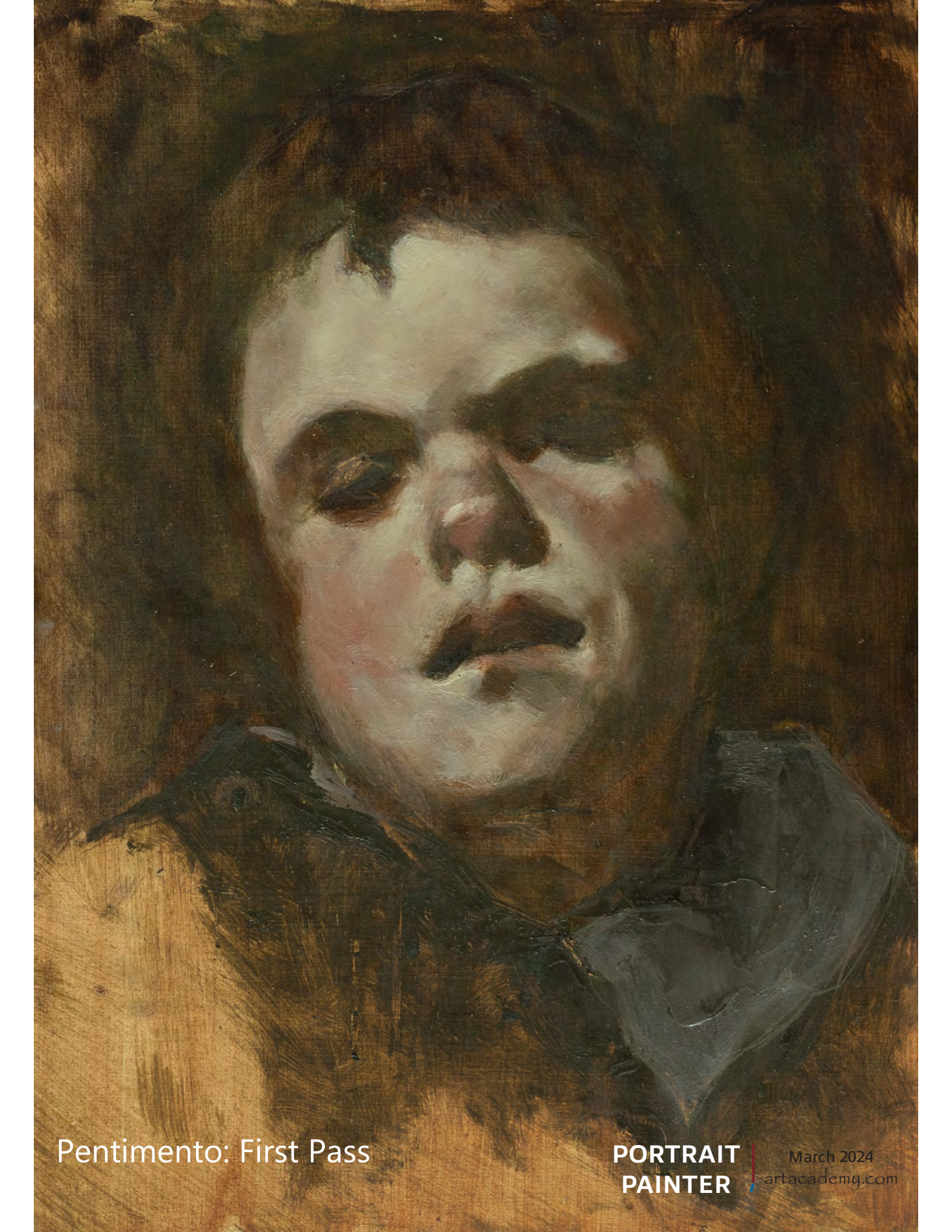
It is for good reason that I limit the ébauche to a palette of only four colors. First, master the possibilities of that restricted palette and step-by-step introduce more colors to your kit.



The practice of spotting color/value notes is predicated on the fundamentals of mixing color values. In this exercise developed from Rembrandt's *Old Man in a Military Costume* I distilled the color notes to a pixelated grid.

Lean back and allow your eyes to fall into soft focus and the facial form manifests.

When you step up to a Rembrandt or a Velázquez, especially *Las Meninas*, the forms dissolve into a marvelous abstraction of color and pigment. As you step back it all snaps into place.



Pentimento: First Pass

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Pentimento: Second Pass

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Finire

The final chapter of a painting invokes going for the full stretch of light to dark / cool to warm without tripping too far toward a garish result.

The accents and highlights are brought to full resolution. The biggest danger is, as always, becoming overly feature centric and precious.

If your foundation is solid there is little chance of your screwing it over. Sure, there will always be those times when a poor decision relegates your hard work to the perigatory of the trash can.

If your foundation is weak, well, there is a saying: 'You can't polish shit.'

But before you slip on a hair shirt and proceed to beating the bejeesus out of yourself bear in mind that even Velázquez had his dogs. Many of John Singer Sargent's paintings lack vitality. That's part of the game.

A great painting is built upon a multitude of failed paintings. For a painter it is the next one that will prove their mettle.



It is harder to see than it is to express. The whole value of art rests in the artist's ability to see well into what is before him.

Robert Henri



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March 2024
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PORTRAIT PAINTING ZOOM COURSE

Painting Velazquez' 'Portrait of a Girl,' 1640

Beginning Tuesday, April 9 to 30, 2024

@ 18:30 - 21:00 PST

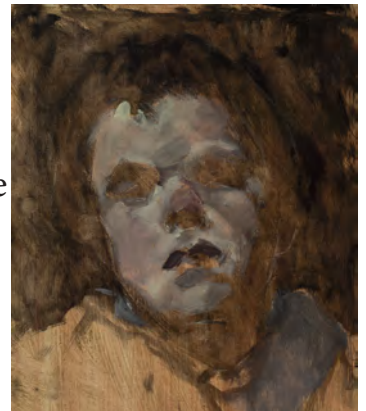
Beginner to Intermediate \$320

Contact: michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com

The Syllabus:

Session 1: The Ebauche

Employing only four colors learn how to strike shape and block-in the major elements of the head looking deep into the structure. From there the initial half-tones are established. This is also how Sargent taught.



Velazquez, El Nino, from my recent Zoom Course

Sessions 2 & 3: The Pentimento

Pentimento is derived from the Italian 'pentirsi', meaning to repent. The initial drawing is corrected as needed and the forms are developed vis-a-vis spotting color/value notes. Unlike the academic approach of coloring-in a preliminary drawing (the cartoon) this is a plastic process of building facial form. This is the method of Sargent and Velazquez.

You'll be introduced to employing calcium carbonate and egg yolk to your oil paint giving it a much greater stability and lustre.

Session 4: Finire

The finire is the striving for the full stretch of light/dark and cool/warm to render a fully three-dimensional, space invasive portrait.

** Each session is filmed and refined in ultra-high definition video (2K) and is your's to keep for both ongoing and future reference. **

Write me at michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com for more information and to register.





Giorgio Morandi, *Natura Morta*, 1951,
37.8 x 45.1 cm

Understructure

Finding the Edge

The first four lines of your composition are the most important; the first four lines, to a large extent, determine the success or failure of your painting. This is your canvas: it's shape and proportion.

For the March issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER I delve into the intrinsic beauty of Giorgio Morandi's oeuvre of still lifes. Well, one still life that recently sold for a cool \$1.5 million.

Morandi (1890-1964) was one of the very few Italian artists who escaped the taint of fascism. Traumatized in the trenches of World War I, Morandi, like many of his generation, sought a return to formal, Classical considerations of art making after the abstract experiments of pre-war painting, circa 1910.

Deceptively simple, Morandi's arrangements of quotidian bric-a-brac hum with kinetic energy. They immediately engage the viewer both on the conscious and unconscious mind. They stay with you, they inform your world view. That is the power of great art.

The color scheme is muted, a chalky primary harmonic triad (red, blue, yellow) tinted, toned and shaded to exquisite, ethereal balance.

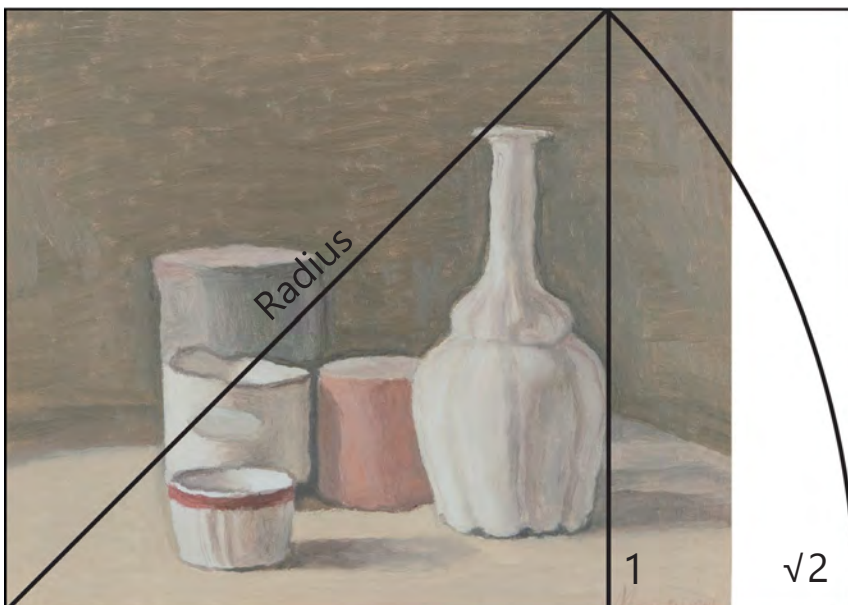
Painting's dynamicism is predicated on contrast. Usually it is light/dark, color contrast. Morandi's dynamicism is the contrast of rough handled brush work (abstract structural surface) and the crystalline chassis of geometry.



My investigative consideration of this painting begins with the **Rabatement**. The Rabatement, the most powerful tool in the painter's kit of harmonious spatial division, is often the fulcrum upon which a composition is built.

The Rabatement is simply applying a square within your canvas (the pictorial arena). It is denoted as **1**.

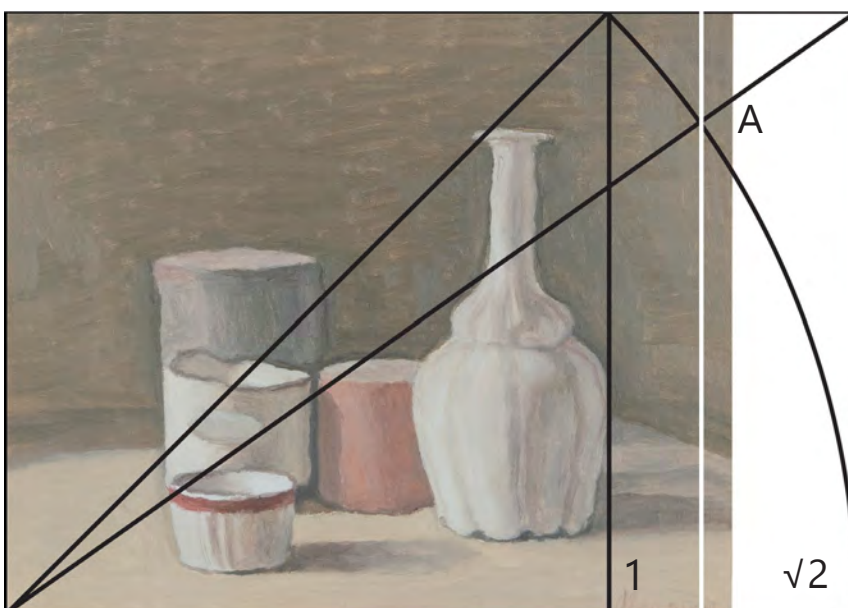
The evidence is apparent. We're off to a good start.



A diagonal is inscribed within the Rabatement which is then utilized as the radius of a circle dropped to the base line.

The result is the $\sqrt{2}$ dynamic rectangle which has a proportion of 1.4142.

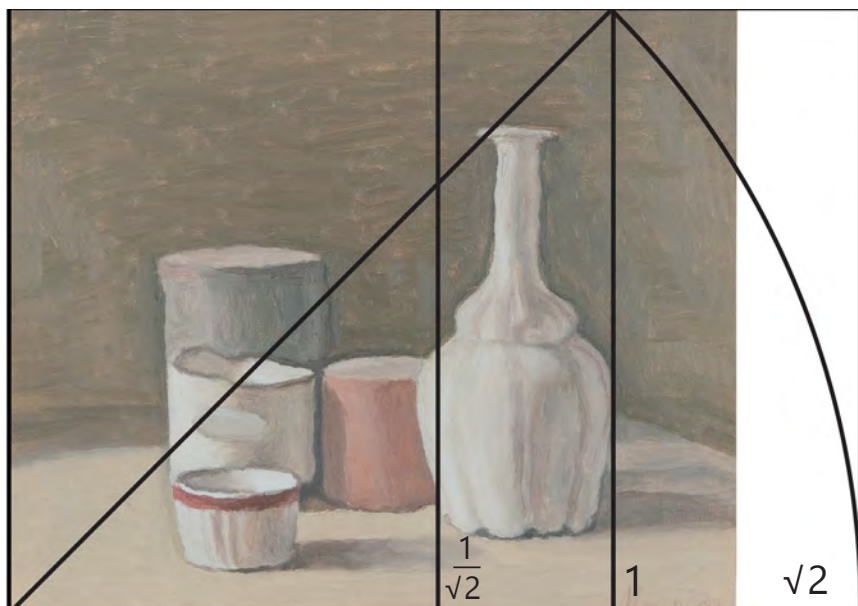
Like many an alibi, the simplest explanation is the most plausible and the most elegant.



Now comes the tricky part. There are several possibilities Morandi could have chosen.

The simplest solution would be to inscribe a diagonal within the $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle to determine the edge of the canvas at the intersection of the arc and said diagonal at **A**.

Nope. No cigar. But this is a viable solution. Morandi chose another ... sigh ... the story of my life.

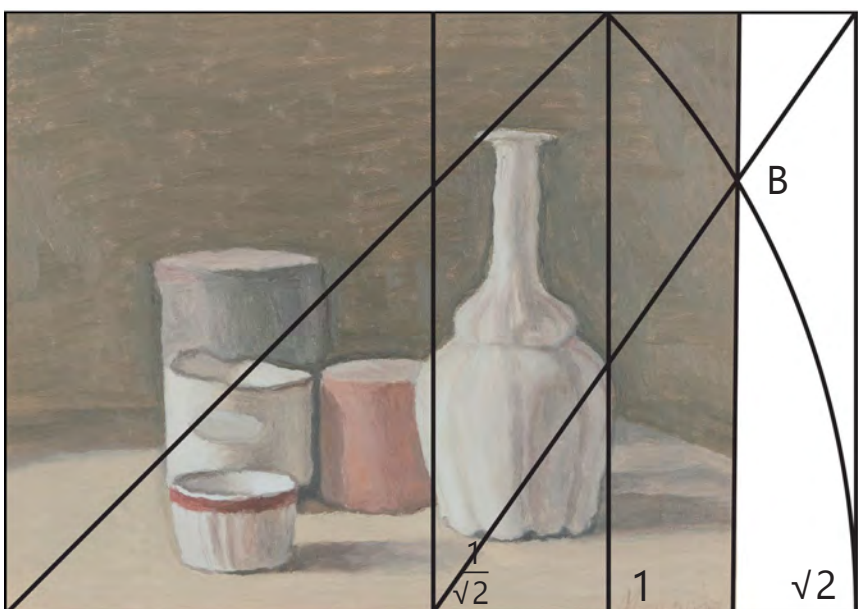


The $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle has two reciprocals— $\sqrt{3}$ has three reciprocals, $\sqrt{4}$ has four reciprocals, $\sqrt{5}$ has five.

A reciprocal mirrors the proportions of the larger shape. I'll forego the construction of reciprocals here as I covered that in depth in the [January issue](#).

The reciprocal is denoted as $\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}}$

The $\sqrt{2}$ reciprocal also determines the center point of the baseline.



Voila voila! The jackpot! Morandi disrobed, the wizard revealed. The intersection at, let's call it **B** determines the edge.

Allow me, perchance, to rock your world!

This is a common construct. For example, Van Gogh employed a similar geometry for *The Starry Night*, 1889. The difference is that he determined his edge with a slightly different diagonal. and *in sinisterium*, reading right to left.



As with color every painter has their timbre. The same with the geometric chassis underpinning their voice. A significant number of Morandi's paintings utilize this chassis. It has a practical purpose too.



There is a tendency of many artists to refuse considering this critical facet to their art making due to the banal fact that they would prefer to buy ready-made canvases to fit ready-made frames.

Suffice it to say that I have a dark, dark view of this practice.

It is limiting—how can one possibly explore and wander the magnificent vistas of art on a short leash?

Why ... you might reasonably ... ask would the art supply indus-

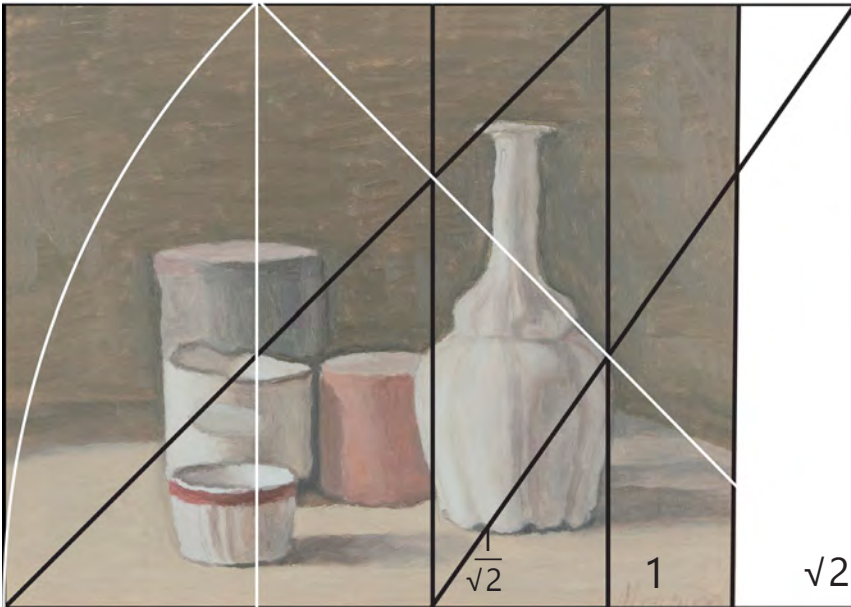
try do this to us?! Economies of scale and demand. Historically, octavol (measures of eight) are significantly more manageable due to their limited size range than the expressive expanse of dynamic canvases. There are a billion shortcuts in painting and they all lead to the same dismal destination.

In this backview of Morandi's painting we can see that he used rudimentary, handcut stretcher bars. They are simple lengths of beveled wood cut with a hand saw to specific lengths. There are small nail holes in the corners suggesting that Morandi used a temporary x-brace to keep the corners squared until the canvas was stretched. Wooden keys (get them by the bag-load at your local artstore) are inserted to keep your canvas taut.

Spend a day or two preparing a good inventory of canvases. Many art stores host one-day canvas-stretching workshops. Often they're free.

I prefer panels that I cut from large oak sheets. That's my timbre. They take as much effort to make as stretched canvases.

Not only do you have a superior quality of painting surface at a lesser cost, but an attachment is also formed at a very deep level to your canvases. Don't discount this. Everything counts in painting.



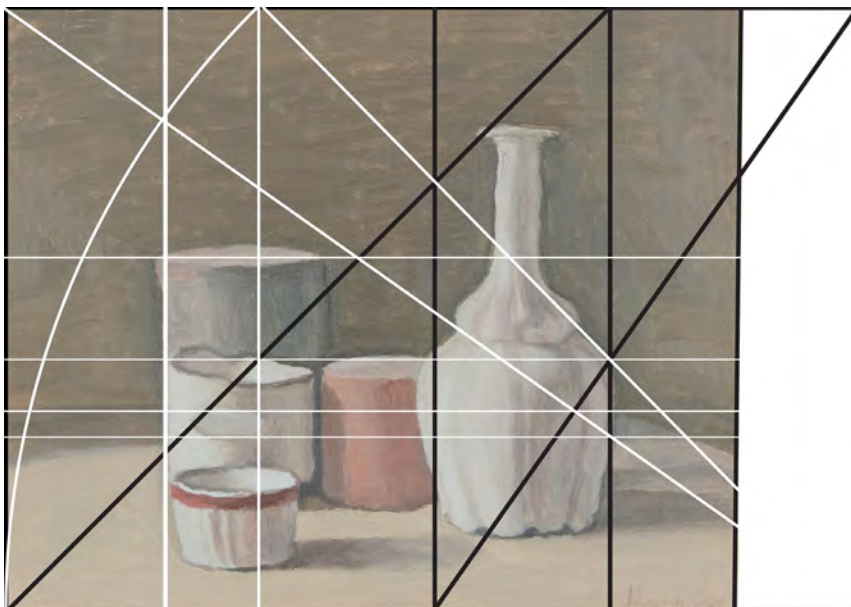
Now that I've gotten that off of my indignant and puffed out chest let's resume our regularly scheduled programming.

Again, an overlapping $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle is deployed *in sinisterium*.



A rendered $\sqrt{2}$ primary diagonal's intersection of the arc at **C** determines the left-side edge of the bric-a-brac's grouping.

Intersection points are the nuts and bolts of dynamic symmetry. Just like an erector set favored by children with an engineering bent to their wee souls.



Thus far we've bothered ourselves with the vertical aspects of Morandi's paintings. The horizontal divisions are determined at the manifold intersection point.

All told ... simple in and of outself is meaningless. However, a simplicity arrived at through a wall of complexity, well, then you got something!

reative process

James

No one in their right mind goes to Alabama in August. Yet there I was. Put up in a flea-bitten motel room. It may have been called Bubba's Forsakened Hell Hole. I don't remember. A memory better forgotten.

What I do remember is the humidity. Hot, fetid, the magnolia's long given up their perfumed ghosts, so, too, the decrepit air conditioner layering a humidity nastier than Faulkner's funereal shroud, soggy and mildewed, laid out on an iron bench in a sauna.

There ain't a whole lot going on in Lanett, Alabama other than a sombre trundle to the bank of the Chattahoochie River to reflect on life's myriad tribulations and to reach deep into oneself to find a reason not to throw yourself into the stygian waters of that miserable river.

James, I think, was considering that grim option. His roost was the rusted swing set, ill-advisedly placed next to the drained, veridian streaked swimming pool where only mosquito larvae dare swim their laps and frolick as only larvae can frolick.

James is an avid reader. Baldwin was his l'auteur de la semaine (author of the week).

A reader, myself, I am constantly burdened with well-thumbed, dog-eared books that I usually abandon in motels, hotels and grimy guest houses. I like to think of them as squaring up pugnaciously to those ubiquitous Gideon's Bibles served up to troubled drifters, poets and painters.



Michael Britton, *James*, Oil on Panel, 9½ x 13", 2023

James and I struck a deal. My trilogy of Cormack McCarthy's western novels—All the Pretty Horses ... it ranks right up there with Salinger and Melville in my humble estimate—in exchange for his posing for this painting.

Painting dark, African skin tones is very much akin to painting brass bric-a-brac. The values jump from light to dark in an instance.

Painting, need I say it again and again?, is much more than simply copying what you see. Copying, learning to strike shape and proportion, is your training. Critical? You bet your ass-worn britches it is.

But there is a caveat lurking here like a salivating cousin secreted in your bedroom closet; technique is a tool. It is not the art.

James was a member in unenviable standing of America's dispossessed. The painting required a rough handled approach. Like James. Pushed and prodded to the brink.

I assaulted the canvas like a donut thickened cop with a bad attitude and a splintered baton. Vine black tempered with venetian red to establish my Notan, the dark/light pattern.

Paint from your gut. Trust that your acquired technique, ingrained into your marrow, will guide your intemperate muse. Should you somehow go astray, and find yourself mired in a place like Lanett, a dry brush and its handle will quickly rectify any miscreant.

I teach my students to strike first. Then verify. That way you train your eye to accurately assess shape and proportion. If you measure out first; well, you're only cheating yourself.



Generally I utilize the ébauche and the first pass of the pentimento to establish the basic forms of the head. I paint as if I am slapping and pushing clay onto an armature. Only the big forms are considered, everything else is subservient.

James' head is mostly darks. They are the foundation here; the small area of lights have the task of telling the story, the narrative.

In the back of my mind was Rubens' *Head of a Moor*, c. 1620. It is a remarkable painting for its empathy and pathos of this marginalized man. Although the Dutch economy was largely underwritten by the slave-trade, slavery in the Dutch homeland was outlawed. Only Spain and Portugal allowed that pernicious trade.

Rubens' interplay of cool grays and warm siennas firmly establish the planar forms of the head. Rubens employs simultaneous contrast to render the vine black tinted lights a bluish quality. Burnt Sienna is a coolish red-orange, a complement of blue; hence, the sienna will push the black tint toward blue.

That stroke of sienna on the lower jaw is a signature device of Rubens. There is nothing new under the sun and if that signature adds to your work, by all means grab it. I often use it, albeit a green stroke, in my work. I consider it my ode to Rubens.

Even at an early stage considerations of the figure/ground relationship torment me.



Unity is prima facie! The ground must contribute to the figure and not steal the show. Even though it plays a subordinate role careful consideration of color, harmonic divisions of pictorial space, its abstract structural surface (the materiality/patina) and narrative conveyed through autobiographical mark-making will either make or break your painting.

It's best to have a strategy. A strategy subject to immediate pivots and plot twists.

Admittedly there is a contradiction here. On the one hand, one should paint without a preconception of the final result. On the other hand, meaning in painting is rendered through the layers of paint. Layering requires a strategy. Composition and color requires a strategy. Exposition of narrative requires a strategy.



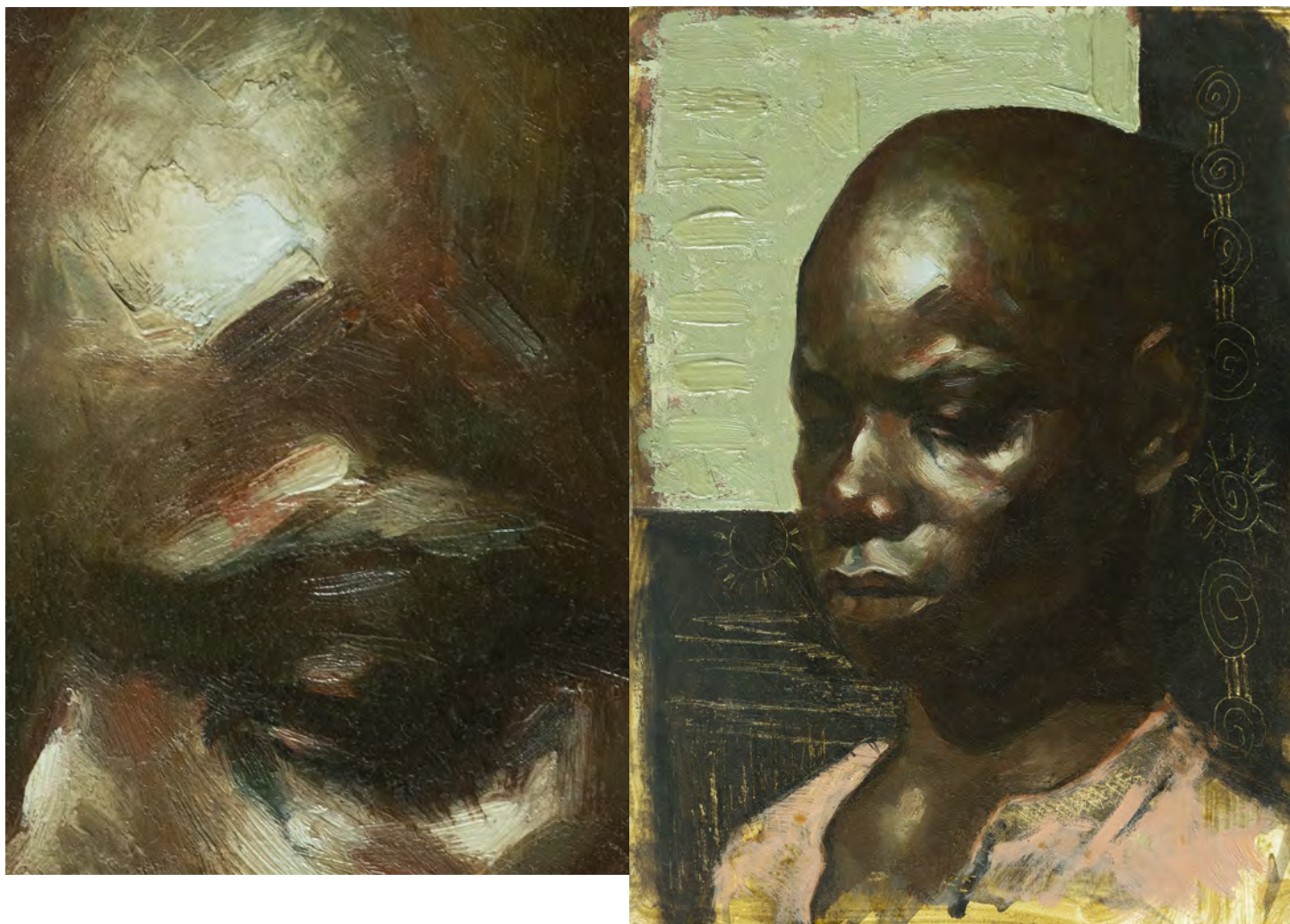
Alas, here I type laden with questions and impoverished of answers. It all boils down to making good and bad decisions.

What I do know however is that I want to convey, somehow express, that crushing loneliness that burdens James.

And for all of my learned means and devices it comes down to pushing and pulling and scraping paint about until I can smell a possible synthesis of pigment and sorrow.

That's the hard part of painting: manipulating paint with integrity and forsaking any thing that smacks of contrivance or cleverness. Constructing a church of truth speaking brush strokes. Easier said than done. More often than not my churches come crashing down. And when they collapse the painting requires purging—a determined, albeit painful, scraping down. Off, off comes the corporeal paint leaving only the ghost.

Nobody wants to kill their darlings, those clever twists of the brush that delight and thrill like a charming sociopath offering only a fabulist spectacle and nothing else.



The finire, the finishing, whatever the hell that is, involves several elements that must meld seamlessly into a unified whole. First, strive for the full stretch of light to dark and cool to warm. Most artists fail to do so, leaving a lot of money on the table.

Oil paint has a wondrous materiality. There's a reason it is the painter's foremost medium. Acrylics lack a soul. They feel cold and lifeless to me. And don't be fooled thinking that acrylics are safer to use. Their chemical base is formaldehyde, an insidious poison that penetrates the skin barrier. So, too, does turpentine. But you can smell turpentine. Formaldehyde is akin to carbon dioxide. It suffocates in stealth.

The solution for those with a sensitivity to turpentine is to use painter's mayonnaise—an emulsion of equal parts white vinegar and egg yolk to three parts and more of linseed oil. Mix it in a sealable jar, shake the bejesus out of it, and keep it stored in the refrigerator. Before painting allow it to come to room temperature.

The abstract structural surface, the texture/patina, of the painting is an important consideration whether you are striving for a slick surface foregoing any trace of the brush or a sculptural carving of physical form.

My wont is the sculptural carving of form. It proffers a more expressive, three dimensional, even space invasive, effect particularly when constructed with a sympathetic correspondence to the anatomical structure of the head.

A rule of thumb is to keep your darks thin and your lights thick. Of course this is not an inviolable rule. I break it often.

Oil paint dries by oxidization, from the outside in which, when painting thickly, renders the paint of your thick strokes with the structural integrity of a jelly donut. Like jelly donuts the result is often dismay.

The rheological solution is to add calcium carbonate, no more than a one-to-one ratio, to your paint. However, calcium carbonate can give a chalky look to your paint. To counter that I use a medium comprised of stand oil, a touch of venetian turpentine (this is an oleoresin, not a solvent) and just a drop of egg yolk. Of course this medium is tempered with solvent as needed.

The calcium carbonate and egg yolk dries oil paint from the inside out, countering the pernicious effects of oxidization, and, an added bonus!, hastens the drying time without the need for fugitive additives such as cobalt dryers.

*

You never really know when a painting is finished. Often times we become precious and tinker about until it all falls apart. The instant I feel a painting starts to degrade I stop, step back and glare at it with baleful eye. Sometimes the painting will submit and offer up a solution. Other times it will confess to an unspeakable crime that needs immediate rectifying.

The best solution, like a poisoned love affair, is to put it aside for a few weeks. Even a few years. Start another painting suffused with new hope. This is a curing process—a necessary recalibration, a fresh calculus of the painting. From there you can decide if it is a keeper or not.



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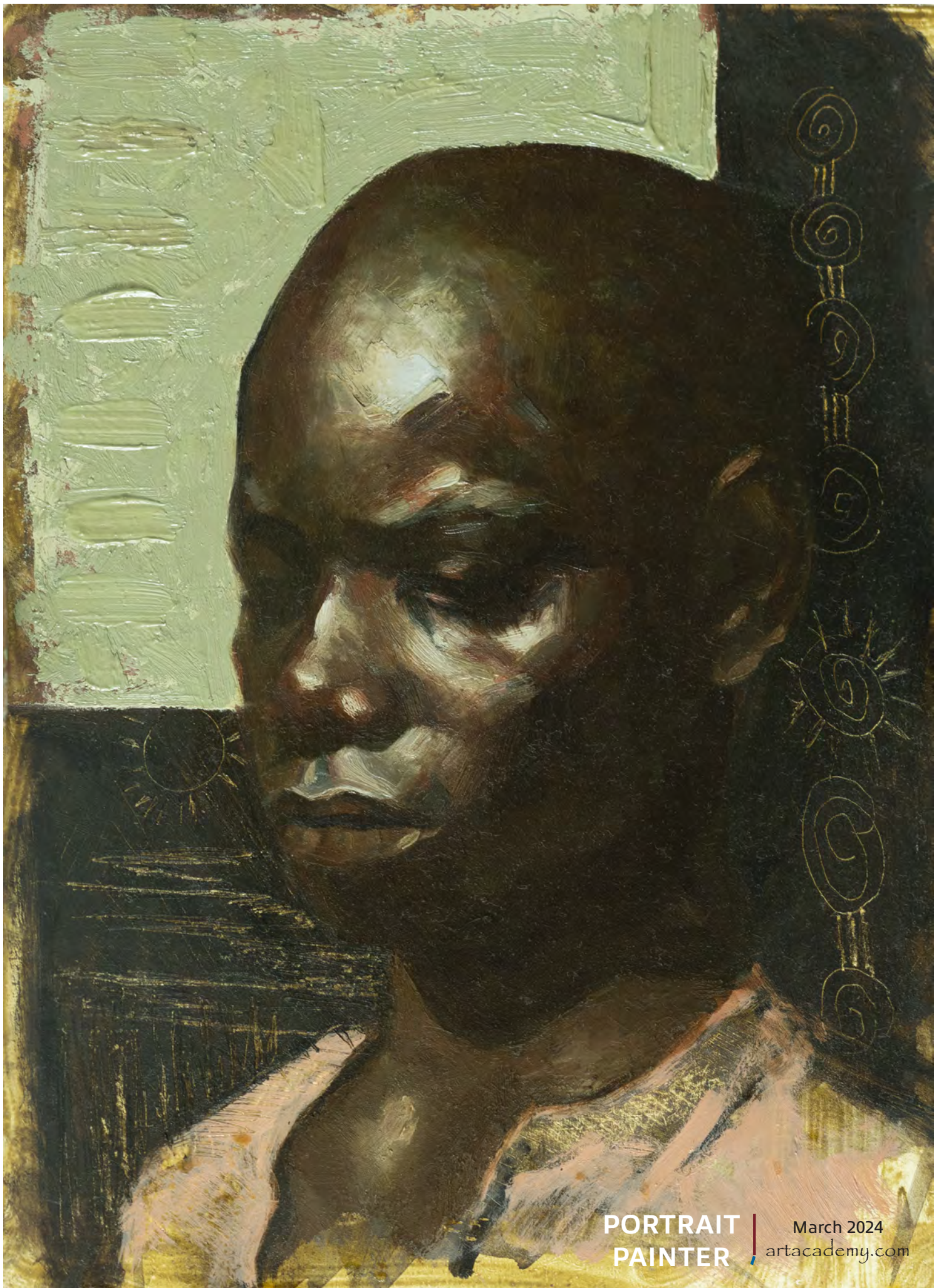
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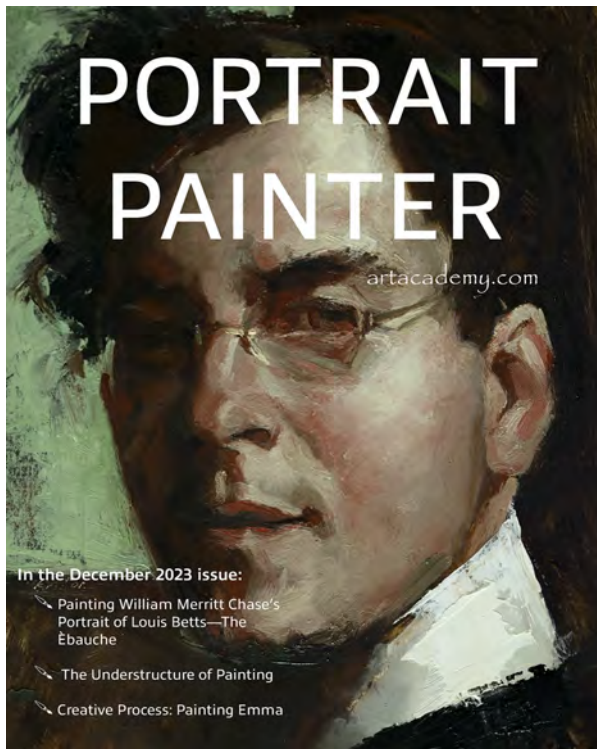
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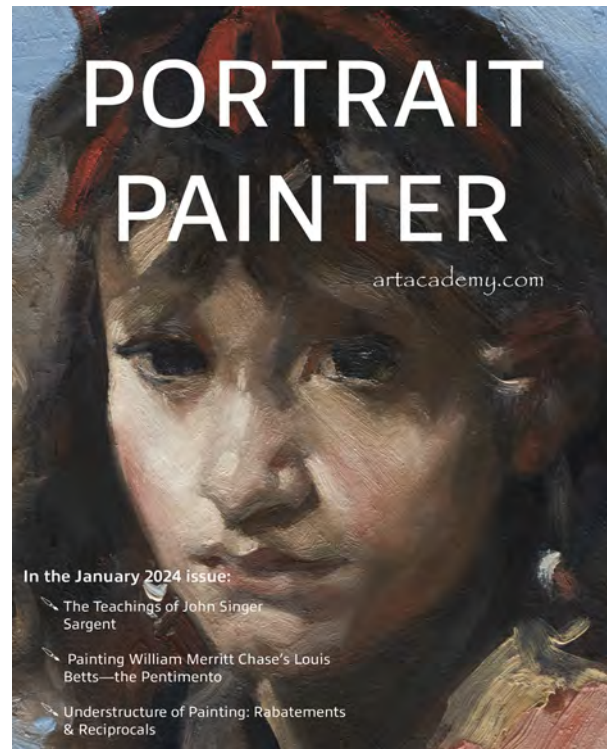
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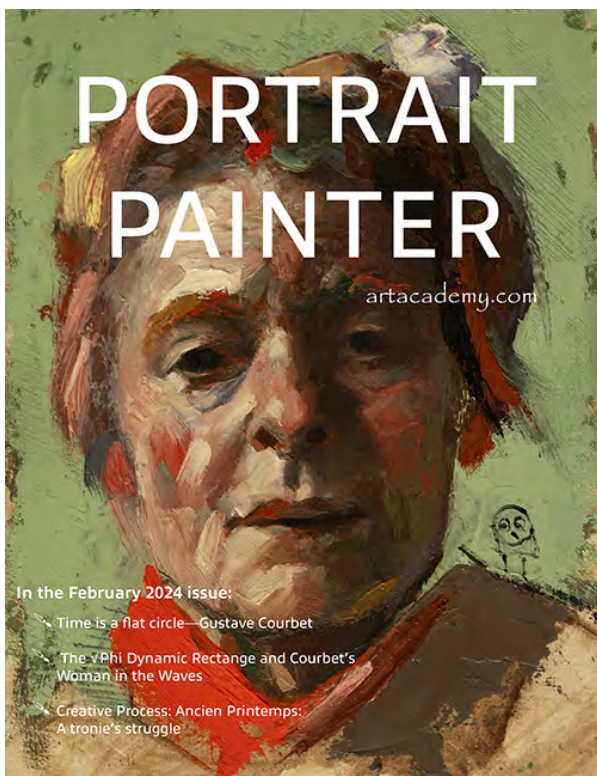
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