



# PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the May 2024 issue:



The Practice of Mixing Flesh Tones



Creative Process: Elements of Contrast  
—Painting Sarah

# A Word ...

The May 2024 issue of **PORTRAIT PAINTER** is video heavier than usual. The focus is mixing flesh tones, the theory and practice.

Flesh tones are a major stumbling block for the beginning portraitist. All too often the portrait 'chalks out'. Too much white. Not enough chroma. Even the palest sitter's skin tone is much darker than one would suppose.

There are innumerable approaches to mixing flesh tones. Some good, some bad, a few excellent. Once you find a compatible process, master it and then adapt it to your needs and voice.

The beginning artist is well advised to spend as much time on mixing colors as they would painting. With practice that will soon change.

**Creative Process** discusses the Elements of Contrast and their utilization in my painting *Sarah*.



Michael Britton  
May 2024

# The practice of mixing flesh tones

Learning to drawing and paint portraits is best tackled with a layered approach. First, you must acquire your drawing skills—initially learn how to strike shape: proportion and angles; a sound understanding of anatomy pays huge dividends; and as you progress into painting the practice of mixing flesh tones is the next hurdle.

Generally, beginning painters should spend as much time mixing their flesh tones as they would actually painting.

Get those initial flesh tones wrong and everything falls apart. The common issue confronting the beginning painter is chalking out. Too much white.

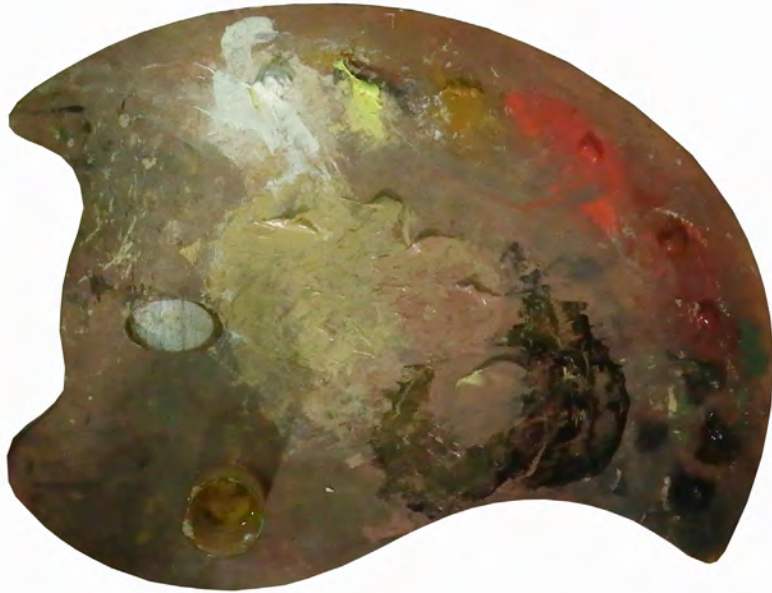
There are innumerable ways to mix flesh tones. In every class, with every instructor, a different approach is presented. Some good, some bad. At the end of the day, you have to decide what works for you. But there are general principles that need to be adhered to no matter how radical your painting voice is.

First, is your palette. A white palette is anathema to accurate color mixing. My preference is the wood palette which, when new, I season with three to five saturations of linseed oil. Allowing each layer to soak in overnight; and then wiping off the excess with a cloth. Yes, your palette will gain weight. And that's a good thing!

At the end of each painting day, I scrape off my color mixes and rub the remainder into the palette with a cloth. Soon your palette will develop a silken, neutral gray patina.



Michael Britton, *Harlequin II*, 2022



Your palette is the most important tool in your painting kit. One can work around not having a 'critical' pigment—the more beloved a pigment, the more likely the art store will be out of stock when you've run out and really, really need it.

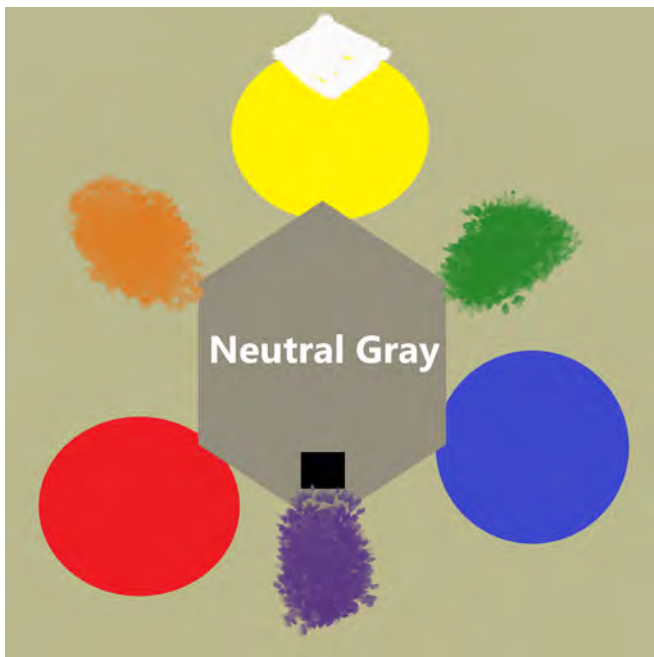
A palette never wears out. Unless, of course, you abuse it and/or leave it behind in an east Texas bus station like a half-eaten egg sandwich that has gone off.

Acquiring a working knowledge of color theory is a step in the right direction. The color tools of mixing flesh tones are: tint, tone and shade.

**Tint** is adding white to a value.

**Tone** is degrading a hue (a specific color) with its complement.

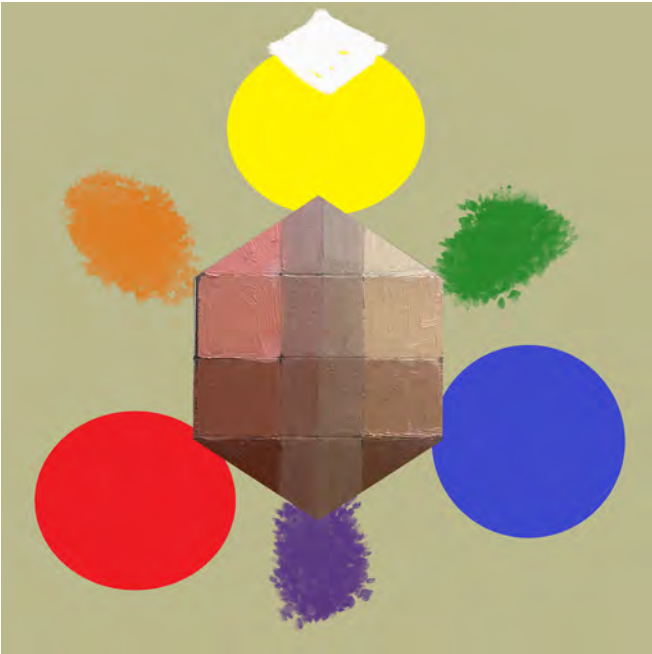
**Shade** is adding black to a value.



The holy grail of flesh tones is the Neutral Gray zone. You arrive there via complementaries: yellow/violet, blue/orange, red/green.

Theoretically, black resides above violet. Kinda like that suspicious fellow who lives in the basement studio apartment next to the boiler room.

White is, well, kind of like the ether of a C.S. Lewis novel. In a fantastical sense it is what the universe is made of. At least in the imaginations of mid-twentieth century science fiction writers. However, given half-a-chance, white will kill your paintings faster than a serial killer whispering soothing homilies whilst hastening your passage from this vale of tears.



As facial form turns into, and away, from the light it's value will change correspondingly. As a form/plane turns toward the light it requires TINT. However, as you tint you need to also add a touch of chroma otherwise you will chalk out and, as with any major exsanguination, the prognosis is dire.

Generally, as a form/plane turns toward the light it becomes cooler. It is in the middle form/plane passages that are warm. The dark, shaded elements will pick up the hues of the background.

In other words, several considerations need to be considered as we render flesh tones. Not only is value + tint/tone/shade required, but also temperature. Cool/warm. And as we paint we need to be sympathetic to the underlying anatomical structure. i.e., seeing through the eyes of a sculptor, to paraphrase John Singer Sargent.



Sound learning and the acquisition of skills require a layered approach. You want to begin with a restricted palette. Master mixing with a limited range of colors.

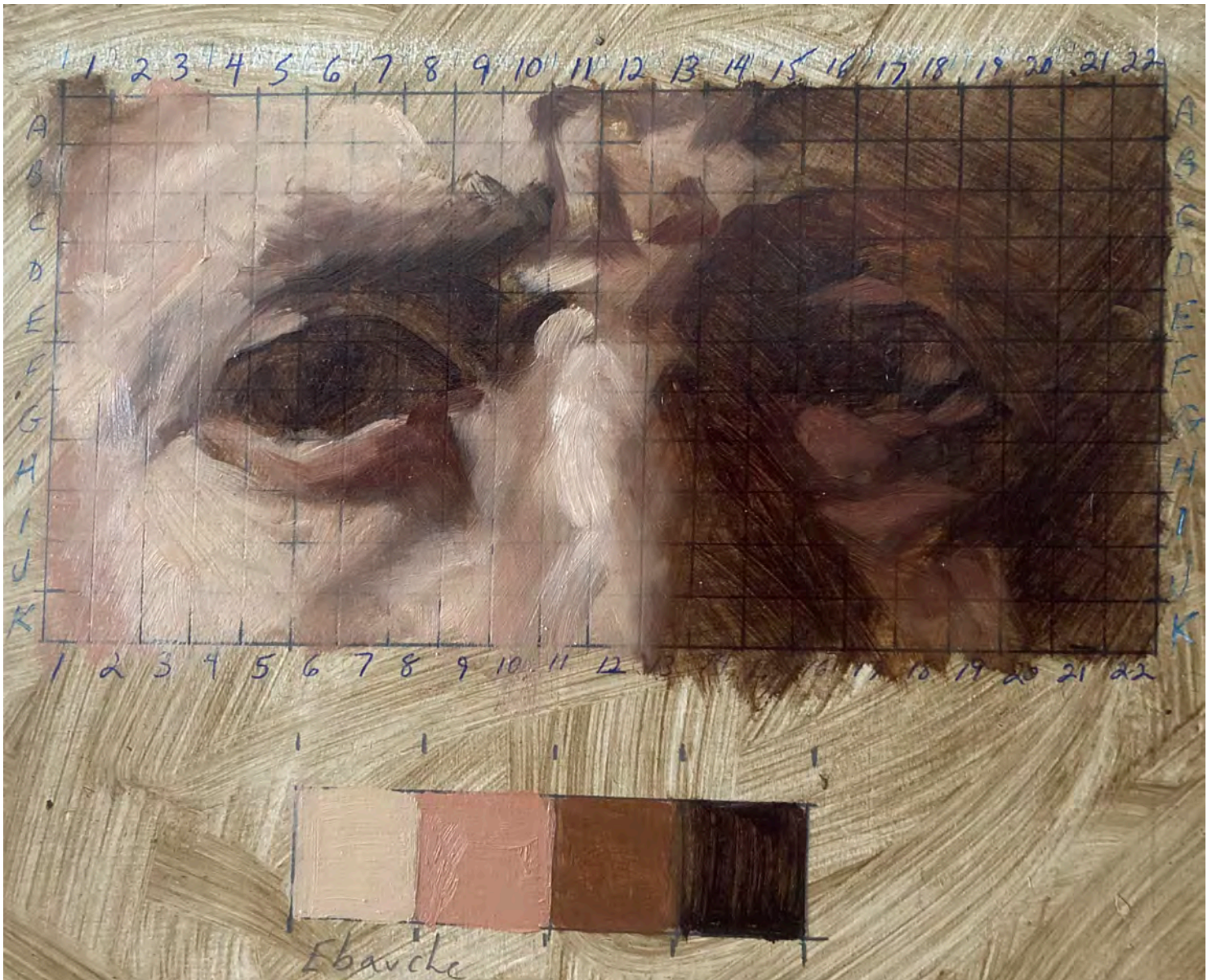
In my workshops we begin the portrait with a limited palette of white/yellow ochre/Indian red/black.

For white I use Cremnitz or flake white. It's an expensive paint. For students I recommend titanium/zinc which is a workable alternative.

Yellow Ochre is our yellow; Indian red our red.

Black (I prefer vine black, ivory works well too) has three jobs: the color black, shade and it is also technically a blue. Those delicate bluish grays in Rembrandt, Velazquez, et al are, more often than not, a tint/toned black. The 'orange' hues of lit flesh push black toward blue (the complement of orange). This is called Simultaneous Contrast, a very powerful tool that can make or break a painting.

When used well simultaneous contrast renders hues to their fullest brilliance. Used poorly and your paintings will look muddy. This is called color collapse.



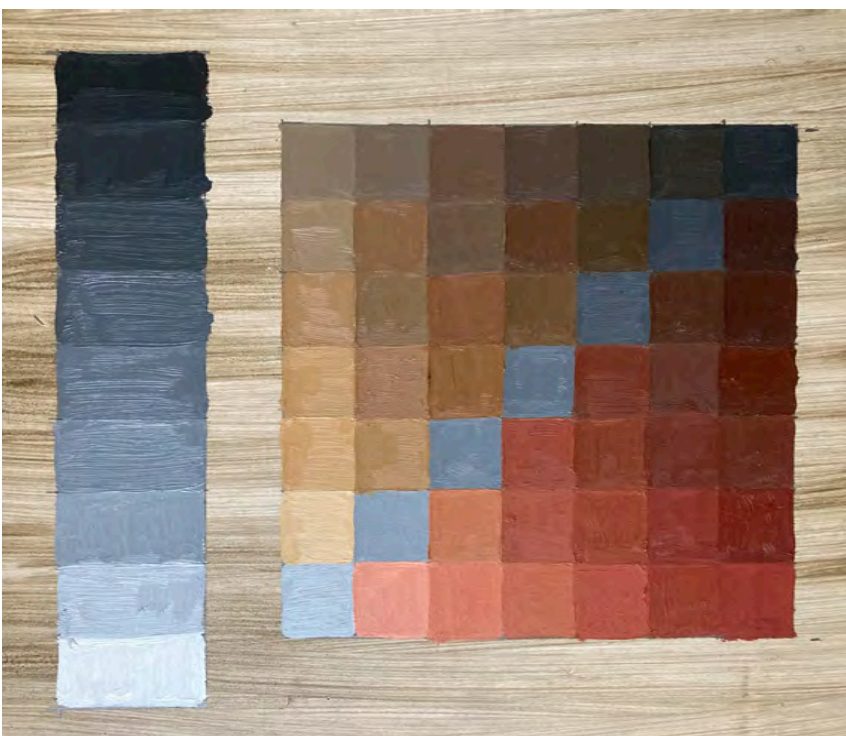
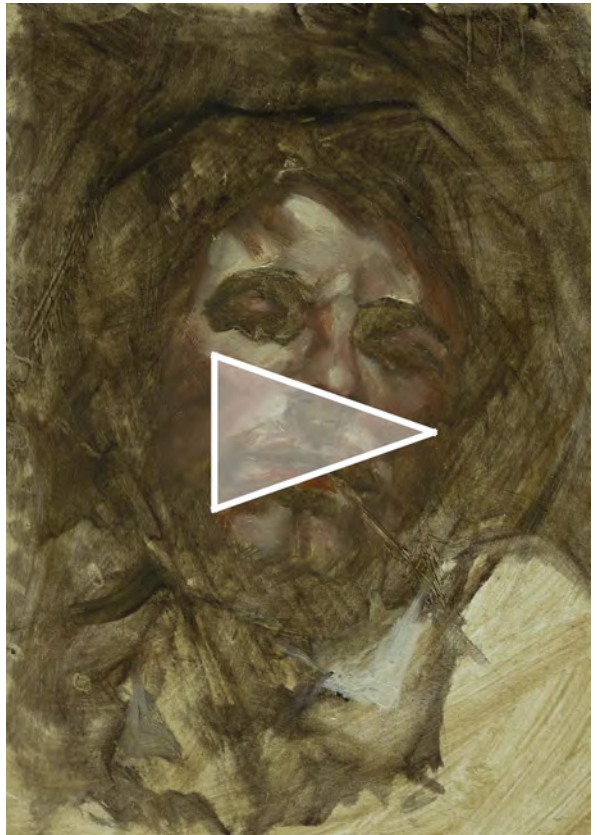
A painting's start (the *Ébauche*) is well served with this limited palette. Once the shape of the arabesque and interior structures are struck and blocked in—using a semi-transparent mixture of black/red—a range of three values are mixed: a light, a middle value and a dark light value. Temperature is roughly considered.

The *ébauche* is the initial establishment of the half-tone values. This is the 'dead' coloring-in. A misnomer that leads many a student astray.

This nigh 23-minute video demonstrates the mixing of the initial values for Courbet's *Self Portrait Smoking a Pipe*.

This video from a previous workshop is 2K ultra-high resolution and compressed to 983MB for trouble-free downloading. Click on the image. This is not a streaming video so be sure to save it for future reference. On Tuesday, May 27 it goes behind the paywall.

The next pass, after the *ébauche*, is the *pentimento* (derived from the Italian *pentirsi*: to repent). Our palette is expanded to nine colors: white, lead tin yellow, yellow ochre, vermilion, burnt sienna, Indian red, terre verte, raw umber and black. This is my work-a-day palette. Of course, additional colors are added as needed.



A good place to begin your color mixing training is with the 9-value gray scale starting from white thru to black. First, establish a visually 50/50 tone for the middle (#5) tone and then the same for #3 and #7 and so on. It does take practice and constant adjustments. While doing so you are also training your eyes to distinguish tones.



Once the 9-bar gray bar is mastered proceed to the above flesh-tone bar.

The top row is achieved with white + yellow ochre that is subsequently toned with the complementary pairing of terre verte (green earth) + burnt sienna. The lighter values are cooler. As you progress add more burnt sienna and in the last two bars apply shade (adding black).

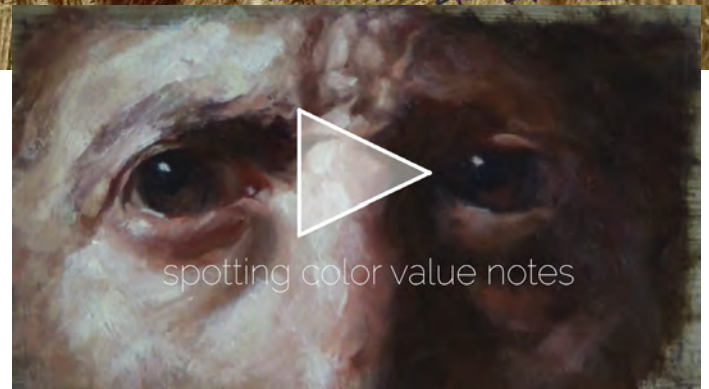
The bottom row represents the warm flesh values. In addition to tone (terre verte + burnt sienna) progressively add vermilion. In the latter four bars introduce indian red along with the vermilion. In bars 7 and 8 apply shade (black).

The middle, intermediary values are: top row: 75% cool value/25% warm value. The second intermediary row: 75% warm/25% cool.

The purpose of this exercise is not to match my values exactly but to acquire the experience of controlled and concordant color mixing. This includes learning the properties of each pigment. Terre verte is a weak pigment whereas Indian red is a beast of a color that readily devours all others.

The quality and brand of your paints will play a significant role. I use both Rublev and Old Holland oil paints. Student grade paints, i.e., Winton, are a false economy. Like cheap dish detergent. And quickly suffer color collapse. That's mud.





Color renders form. The hues from the previous exercise are plotted onto a grid of 22 X 11 squares to effect a pixelated copy of Rembrandt's 'Old Man in a Military Costume'. This is the first step in acquiring the skill of spotting color/value notes.

Spotting color/value notes entail: 1. Selecting the color/value; 2. Placement—plumbing vertically and horizontally; 3. Shaping it to correspond sympathetically with the underlying anatomical structure. Shaping is your brushwork, your autographic voice.

The above 19:32 minute video presents this idea of brushwork painting Rembrandt's eyes. It is 720 resolution. Alas the 2K version is too large for my ISP's server.

As a general rule, when a passage is rendered too light it should be scraped out. I use my palette knife. In oil painting it is much more efficacious to lighten an overly dark passage, but the devil to correct an overly light 'pop out'. I don't hesitate for a moment to scrape out an offensive passage.



The nature of flesh is a kaleidoscope of cool greens/blues/yellows juxtaposed to warm reds/oranges. Examine the palms of your hands and you can gain a better understanding of the flitting, fluting, interactions of cool and warm complementaries. Flesh is translucent: hot blood and cool fats coursing beneath a semi-transparent sheath of skin.

Skin tone denotes emotion. But emotions/spirit are transitory. Fleeting. Joy and melancholy interlaced. We are complex creatures and your flesh tones and autographic mark making should express this. At least at the higher levels of painting.

That said, where does the beginner begin? Well, as I wrote previously herein, a restrictive palette of four colors (white, yellow ochre, Indian red (or Venetian Red) and Vine or Ivory black and the Ébauche. That sets up your solid foundation.

Acquiring a competency in the *ébauche* significantly smooths the way toward creating good, engaging paintings.



If an *ébauche* is off to a bad start, no amount of tears and recriminations will save the painting. Still births never resurrect. John Singer Sargent likely scraped down to the prime more *ébauches* than he completed paintings. Of course, one doesn't keep records of one's misses. But sometimes a disappointing start will escape a painter's wrath.

Sargent took a direct approach in this *ébauche*. Sans preliminary drawing he applied his loaded brush as if it were laden with colored clay. He painted with a sculptural sensibility serving it up in the abstract.

Every stroke was given due consideration as he articulated the planes, values and temperature within the head and collar.

Like Sargent train yourself to look past the features and to see deep into the basic building blocks of facial form. There is a massive gulf between looking and seeing.

Sargent counseled his students to "... work on a head for a week without indicating the features [and] you will have learnt something about the modelling of the head."

There are basically two approaches to portrait painting: the common is the illustrative wherein one basically colors-in the drawing. The illustrative practice reaches all the way back to the Renaissance and beyond and is, with exceptions, of course, the academic approach.

The other is the sculptural, Baroque (i.e., Rembrandt, Velàzquez, et al) that exalts in the materiality of oil paint and illusionism.

# reative process

## Sarah—Elements of Contrast

A painting is predicated on contrast:

- ⇒ Light/Dark
- ⇒ Shape
- ⇒ Color
- ⇒ Temperature
- ⇒ Texture
- ⇒ Rhythm

It is through contrast that a painting's expression is given.

### Light/Dark

The light/dark patterning falls within the rubric of the Notan, a Japanese term for light/dark harmony. It is the Notan that sticks a painting to the wall.

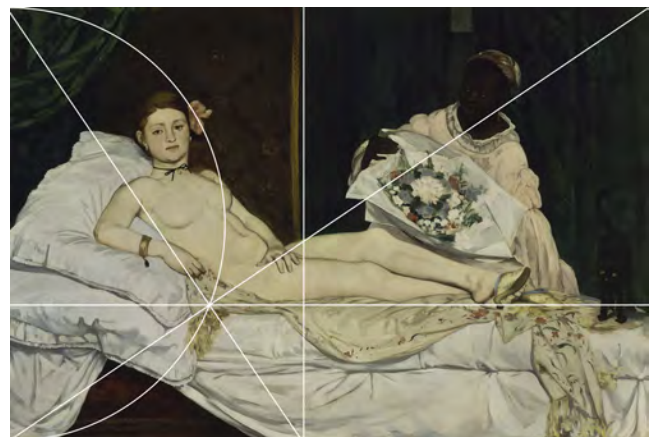
The less light/dark contrast the painting will read as flat. Beginning and intermediate artists often fail to achieve the full stretch of light to dark. However, as with anything, there is a limit, a boundary where too much contrast condemns a painting. Where that boundary lies depends on each painting.

### Shape

Shape determines the narrative. Big shapes/ small shapes. Oval/square/triangle. Opposition/transition. These are the base notes. And all need to be balanced in a concordant correspondence to the whole, the composition. That 'whole' is determined by the shape of your canvas (dynamic/octavol) and the geometric correspondences that determine the divisions of pictorial space.



Michael Britton, Sarah, Oil on canvas, 24.5 x 31cm, 2024



## Color

Color is the prime material of painting and its elements of contrast are defined as:

- ⇒ Contrast of hue
- ⇒ Contrast of light and dark colors
- ⇒ Contrast of cool and warm colors
- ⇒ Complementary contrast
- ⇒ Simultaneous contrast
- ⇒ Contrast of saturation (quality)
- ⇒ Contrast of extension (quantity)

## Temperature

A painting can be read as 'hot', 'warm' or 'cool'. Most paintings are warm. The 'hot' and 'warm' elements should be offset with cool elements. A painting comprised of only warm/hot elements will appear flat and its 'heat' diminished.

## Texture

The abstract structural surface, the patina, of the painting, too, is contrasted between smoothly rendered passages and thickly applied strokes of paint. Generally, the darks are painted thinly; the lights thick. Your brushstrokes should be rendered with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical structure.

Edging is another consideration. Forms are defined at their planar edges. The faster a form turns away from the light source the harder the edge. Conversely, soft edges denote a gently turning form. Thus planar edges need to be 'knitted'. Not blended. Blending is destructive of form, knitting is constructive.

## Rhythm

Shape and line express velocity. Contrasts of horizontal, vertical and diagonal movements should be considered in terms of directing the viewer's eye through the composition: accelerating and braking with a rhythmic concordance.

These are a lot of elements to consider and are best approached layered. The ebauche is a good place to begin mastering the elements of light/dark and contrast of shapes. To wit, the initial striking of shape and modeling.

## The Èbauche

A painting's success is often determined by its start. But that is not guaranteed; there are many pitfalls encountered in the journey of creative process.

Sometimes, it seems, the more you care the more you're damned. It is the offhand remarks, the carefree strokes of the brush, that sometimes ignite a painting's direction.

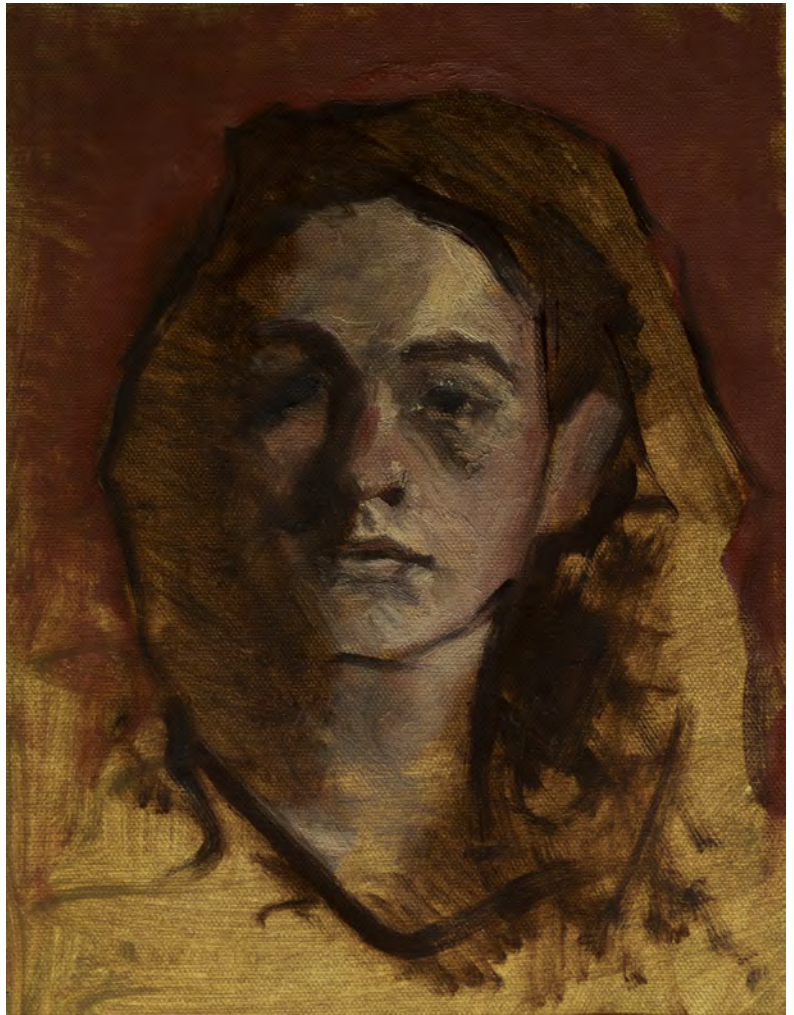
'Carefree' is a beguiling term. The seemingly effortless gliding of the brush belies an acquired foundation of striking shape.

Before my brush ventures forth considerations of my canvas and imprimatur (the initial toning of the prime) are thought out.

We all have biases, which are best served as starting points. I have an affinity for the  $\sqrt{\phi}$  canvas (the square root of the golden number 1.618 which is 1.272) but other dimensions are also considered.

My preference, too, is for a warm imprimatur. In *Sarah* my imprimatur is a yellow ochre toned with a small touch of vine black to cut the mustardness of the yellow.

Painting is a journey of decisions—good and ill. The first decision is whether or not *Sarah* would be rendered casually or better presented with a defined geometric understructure as with *Verna*. The verdict is often decided by my gut. My instinct. An instinct formed more by failures than successes. And the experience of dismal failure followed by a quantum leap and a successful painting. Like a phoenix risen from cold ashes.



Michael Britton, *Verna*, Oil on Panel, 2023

I begin with a large round brush loaded with Indian red and vine black, a dark violet, the arabesque is struck and its placement determines the composition. If the arabesque's placement is unsatisfactory I simply wipe it out with my rag and strike it again.

Foregoing a preparatory drawing and striking directly with a brush initiates an immediate engagement with the painting. An emotional bond is formed. And a tumultuous affair begun, replete with all the pleasures and recriminations of any relationship.

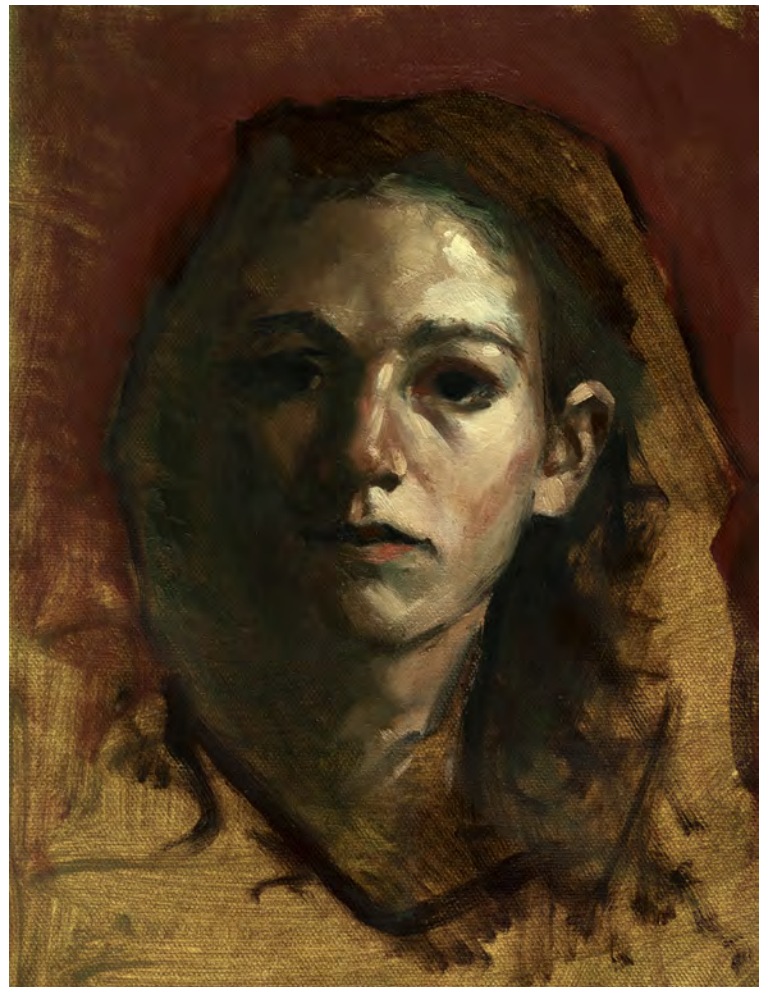
As I instruct my students to do, I begin with a limited palette of flake white, yellow ochre, Indian red and vine black. My medium is a basic one part oil to four parts turpentine. If I am ensconced in a hotel room I will use painter's mayonnaise—a concoction of white vinegar, egg yolk and oil. It has a more agreeable smell than turpentine which can attract a housekeeper's wrath.

I add calcium carbonate to my half-tones. It adds bulk to my paint and stabilizes and hastens the drying time of oil paint. Unless it is a dreary wet winter day the paint will be dry and ready the next morning.

I paint with a sculptural sensibility broadly building up the facial forms as if slapping on clay. And serving it up in the abstract. Minimal consideration is given to the features other than their placement.

In the *ébauche* my prime considerations are the contrasts of light/dark, shape and rhythm. The flesh tones are a secondary consideration. Not dismissed. They are better served somewhat darker and warmer in this initial start than what the final resolution will be.

### **The Pentimento: first pass**



I switch up to my full palette for the first passage of the pentimento (Italian *pentirsi*: to repent). The forms are further developed but not to full resolution. Frankly, I'm a coward. I prefer to be apprised of any and all avenues of escape before the mephitic maw

of catastrophe snaps shut entrapping me. Working from general to specific is an inviolable rule of, well, everything. And thus spake a fella who abhors rules unless they serve my painterly ambitions. The rules of painting and technique should be considered as tools to be employed for the betterment of a painting and not an enslaver to grind your muse to dust.

The contrasts of color, all seven of them, are introduced onto the playing field that is my canvas. The facial forms are further developed. I strive to carve out the forms using my brush as if it were a hatchet. 'Tis not the time for delicate rendering.

The green-toned stroke at the jowl is a devise of Rubens. It's effect is to both cool the jowl and turn it planarly inward from the light source while further warming the cheek vis-a-vis simultaneous contrast.

The painting's narrative begins to take shape. In tandem with the pulling and pushing of facial forms the spirit/emotional is considered.

A major decision is required: should the painting be fully developed or the bulk of it left unfinished. That is another element of contrast: raw/polished.

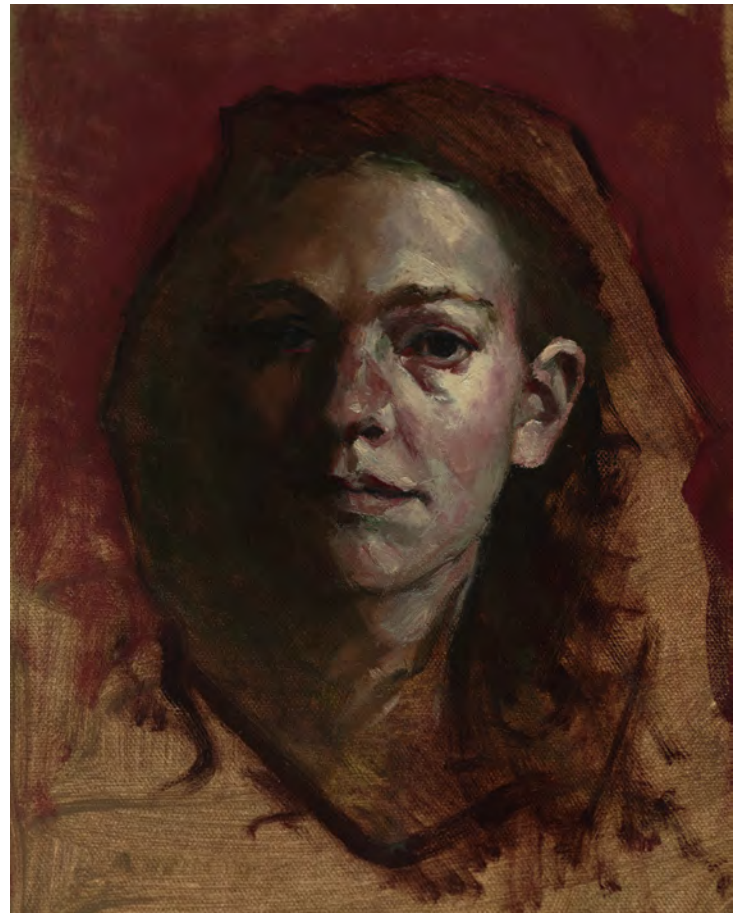
### **The Pentimento: second pass**

My preference is the unfinished. Often fully resolved paintings, where every millimeter is painted, close off the narrative. The statement rendered concrete, immoveable.

My intent is for Sarah's story to be open. A dialogue between paint and viewer. I am no longer part of the equation.

Sarah's story is told by the interplay of cool greens and warm, sanguine reds. A constant shifting of moods; like wind-rustled leaves.

There is a physiological rationale to flesh color. When distraught, or excited, the nose will flush. It becomes warmer and darker in value.





## The Finire

The primary consideration of the Finire, the finishing/resolution, of a painting is UNITY. All of the elements—pictorial, spirit and construct—must come together into a unified whole. Otherwise all is for naught.

Pictorially my considerations are, in equal measure, to achieve the full stretch of light/dark and cool/warm and edging.

Edging determines the value and velocity of planar changes. A sharply turning plane will require a hard edge. A gradually turning plane requires a softer edge.

If your edges are too sharp your painting will flatten and lose three-dimensionality. Conversely, overly soft edges will obliterate all sense of form.



My brushstrokes, my autographic expression, are rendered with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical form. This, too, is painting with a sculptural sensibility. Another consideration is the fractal concordances of form. One brushstroke defines the next. Driven by recursion, fractals are images of dynamic systems.

It is through the copying of master works, Velazquez, Degas, etc., that the keys to plastic fractality is are appreciated.

All in all, we painters are embarked on a never-ending voyage of discovery.

My upcoming **Portrait Painting Zoom Class** begins Tuesday, May 28 at 18:30 PST for four sessions.

Syllabus: Study of facial structure, color mixing and the spotting of color value/notes. Our reference is a high resolution image of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*.

Write me at [michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com](mailto:michael-britton-workshops@artacademy.com) for more info and to register.

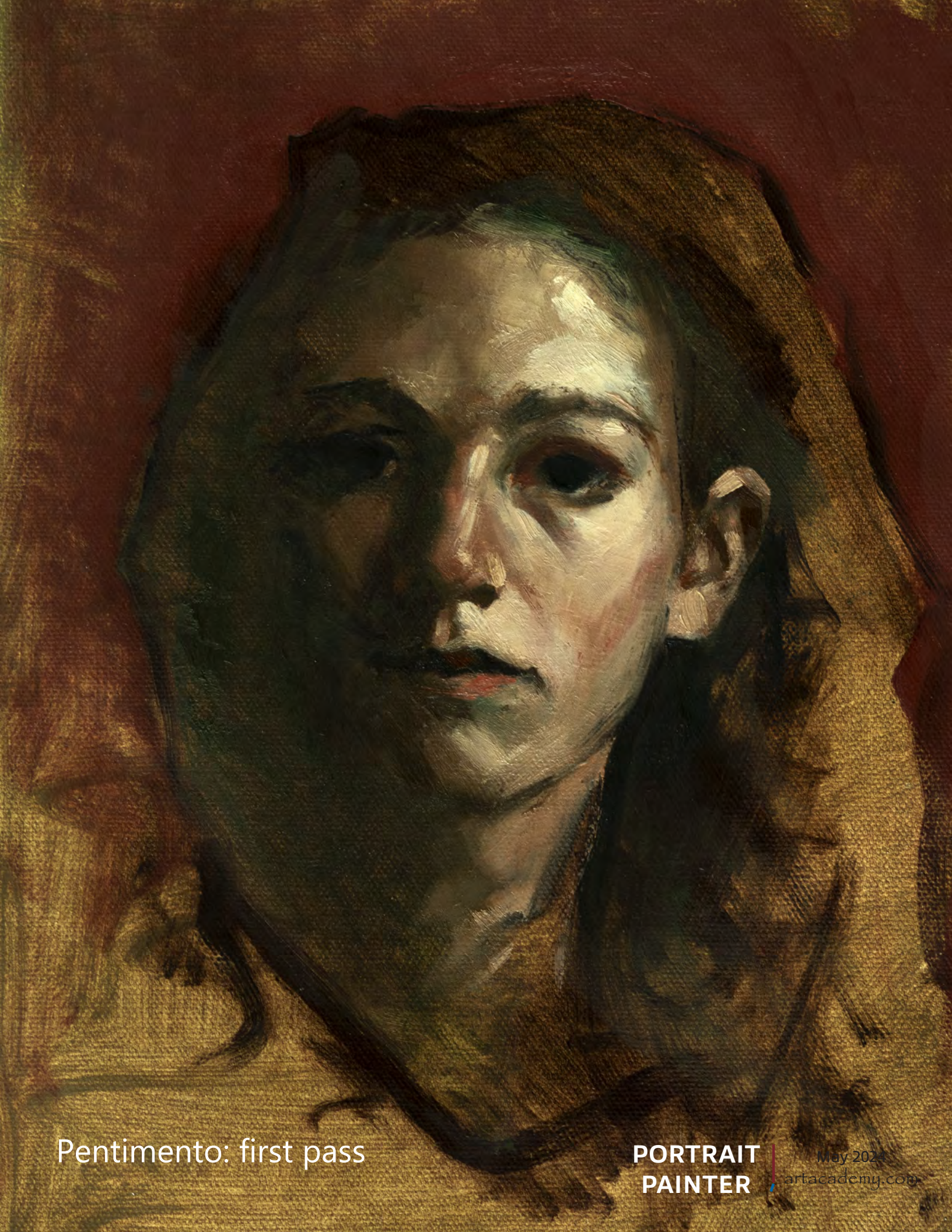




Ébauche

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Pentimento: first pass

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Pentimento: second pass

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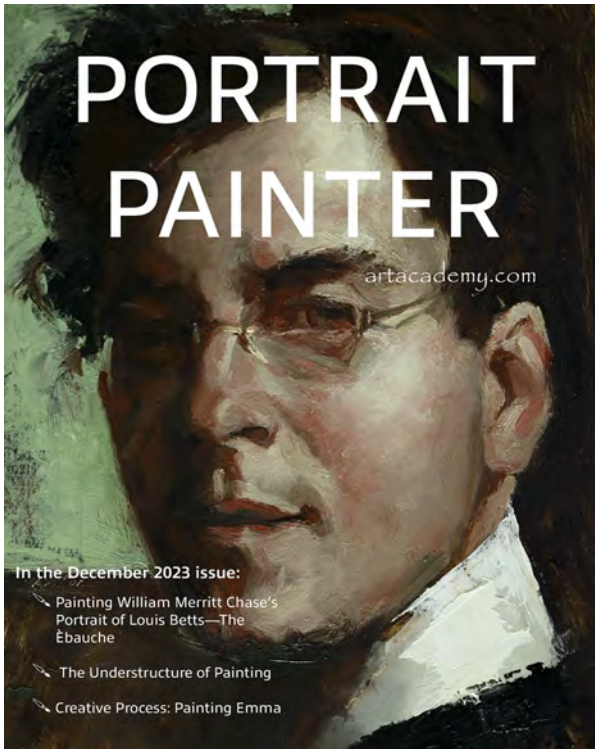


Finire

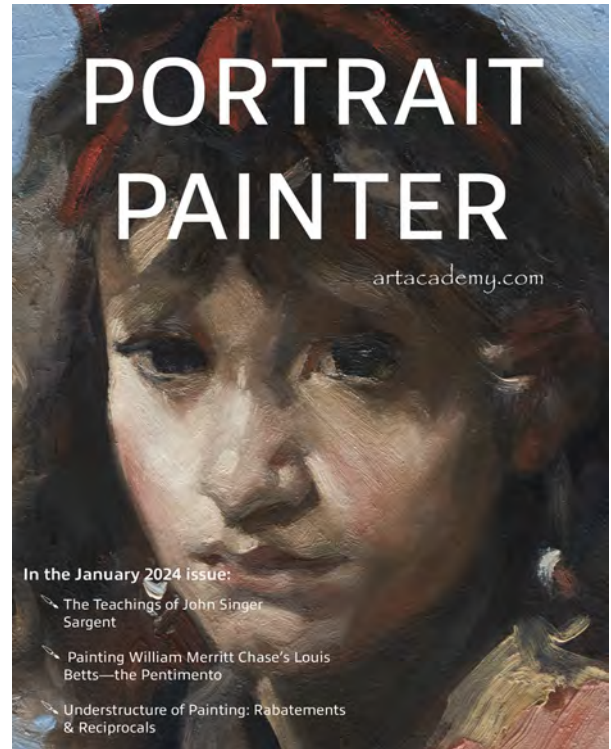
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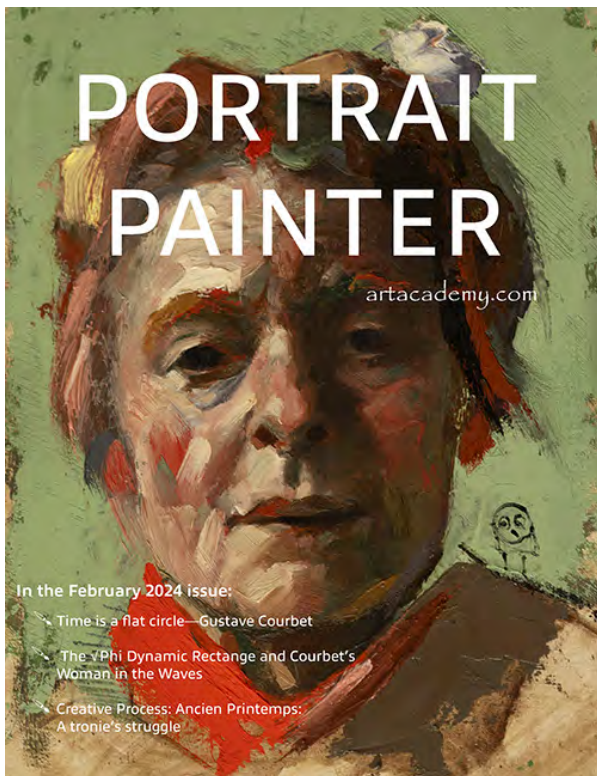
Miss an issue?



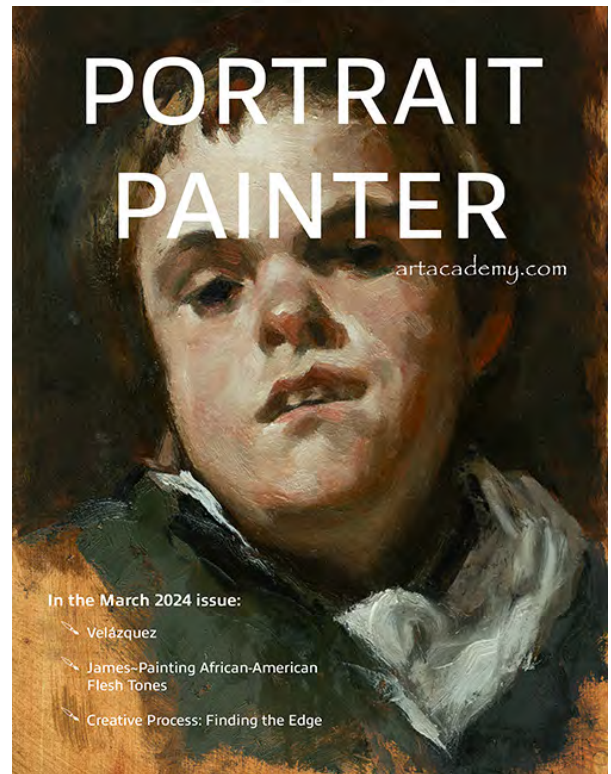
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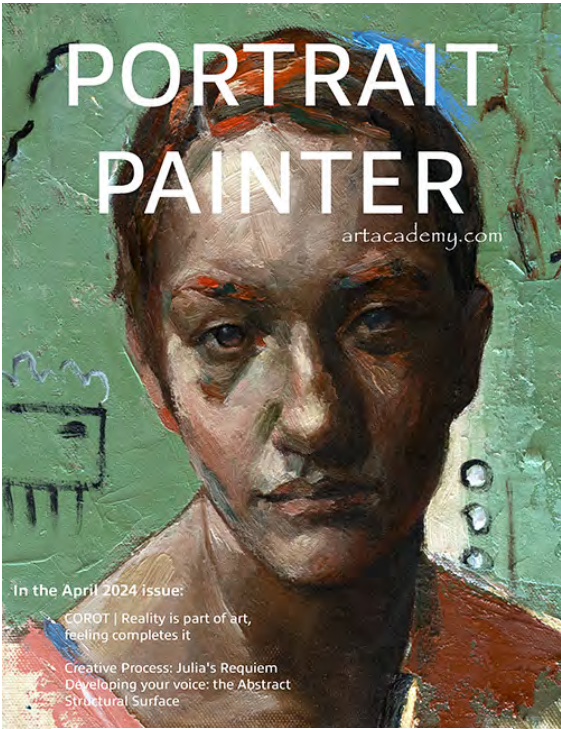
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