

September 2025

# PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the September 2025 issue:



Fa Presto! Frank Duveneck's Whistling  
Boy, 1872



Harmonious Divisions of Pictorial Space

# A Word ...

The August 2025 issue of PORTRAIT PAINTER was set aside unfinished and is now become the September issue. Not only was my dance card full but I reasoned that everyone was on vacation.

Frank Duveneck (1848-1919), Kentucky born and Munich trained coulda been a contender for the crown of American painting had he stuck to his bravura brush strokes and not be dragged back into the coy banalities of 19th Century academic painting. Sure ... them's fightin' words.

Duveneck's *Whistling Boy*, 1872, Cincinnati Art Museum, is arguably the finest painted head in the whole of American art. It is genius fa presto! The remainder of the painting not so much.



Michael Britton  
September 2025

# Fa Presto—An Unsuspected Man of Genius

In the latter half of the 19th Century there were two tracks of study a painter could choose from. In Paris the L'école des Beaux-Arts spear-headed by Jean-Léon Gérôme and Munich where Wilhelm von Diez wielded a pigment loaded brush like a saber.

In the 1860's and 70's Paris was dirty and troubled—precious few croissants and éclairs were to be had for one's petit déjeuner (breakfast). First laid under siege by the Huns and in 1872 rocked by the Paris Commune uprising and ruled by Napoleon III, an incompetent autocrat. Hardly the City of Light experienced during the Belle Époque and Hemingway's 'The Sun Also Rises' sojourn in the 1920's.

Munich was the place to be. A vibrant city of never-ending celebrations and debauchery. Under Wilhelm von Diez's tenure the Royal Academy of Munich's pedagogy stressed **paint the painting and not just the subject!** An approach that was diametrically opposite to Gérôme's studious academic curriculum that, frankly, was lost wandering the ruins of Athens.

The painterly rivalry between Paris and Munich soured in August 1914. Germany and its erstwhile side-kick Turkey turned inwards whilst its troops took up soggy residence in northern France.



Frank Duveneck, *Whistling Boy*, 1872, 70.8 x 53.7cm, Cincinnati Art Museum

The Paris/Munich rivalry played out in the direction of American art. Coevals all Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) were products of the L'école des Beaux-Arts; the three musketeers of American painting: William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902) and Frank Duveneck (1848-1919) led the Munich charge.

Beginning in 1875 and for a short time after Frank Duveneck was the most famous and successful artist in America. Alas, the good times came to an end, as all good times do, and Duveneck was swallowed into obscurity.

Chase founded the Chase School of Art, now Parson's School of Art and Design in New York; Mary Cassatt ... well, she's Mary Cassatt; and Eakins after a dismal portrait painting and teaching career is now ensconced in the pantheon of American painting.

Having had a taste of the good life at 27—John Singer Sargent remarked that "Duveneck was the greatest talent of the brush of this generation"—Duveneck's career unraveled. Or raveled. They mean the same. A genius manqué afflicted by the painter's curse of anguished ambivalence he lost his footing mid-career.

Had Duveneck stuck to his bravura guns and not monkey about with second-rate academic painting à la Gérôme, in a vain gambit to re-invigorate his career, Duveneck would have ascended the throne now occupied by Eakins.

At great risk of my being summarily tarred and feathered ... Eakins was not a preternaturally gifted painter. He applied a workman's discipline to learning his craft in Gérôme's atelier. His paintings, both oil and watercolor, of scullers on the Schuylkill river are first-rate. His portraits, however, have an overly studied and wooden stiffness. More than a few of his clients ignominiously disposed of his portrait paintings.

His teaching career came to a spectacularly dismal end when he was summarily dismissed from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1886 upon accusations of unsavory indiscretions.



Thomas Eakins, *Self-Portrait*, 1904



Frank Duveneck, *The Water Carriers*, 1884

There is a disingenuousness to Duveneck's *The Water Carriers*. Well into his failing career Duveneck felt compelled to ape Gérôme. Although skillfully rendered it could have been painted by any academically trained artist on both sides of the Atlantic.

Craft alone will not save you. Craft is best served as an architecture supporting an honest voice. *At Anchor*, also painted in 1884, reveals the possibilities of Duveneck. *At Anchor* is an honest painting.



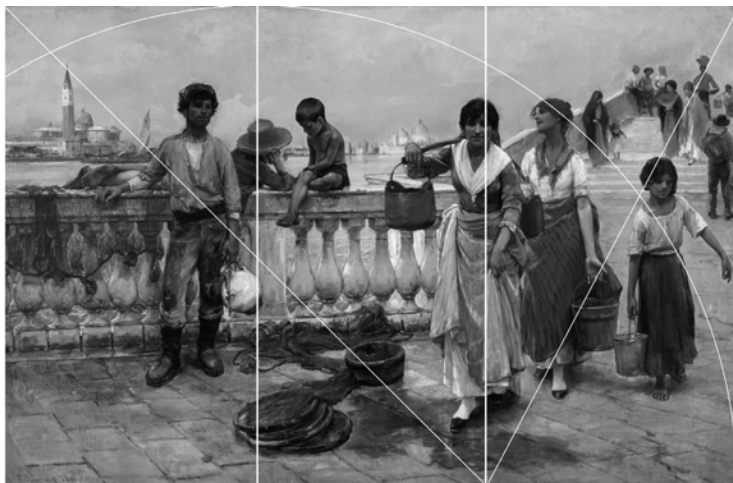
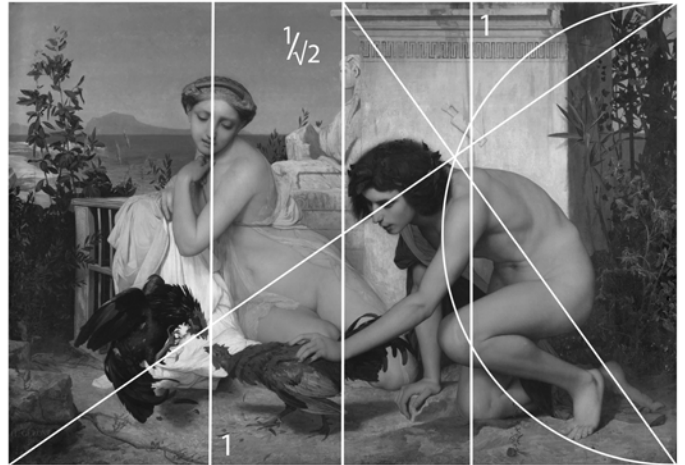
Integrity carries weight.

It is integrity that places Eakins above Sargent ... Oh sweet Lord ... I can hear the tar pot a-bubbling and the feathers being fluffed ... in the pitiless rankings of art history. Although wooden and overly studied Eakins is more compelling than the oft (but not always, of course) deft society portraits of Sargent. Which, to be honest, could be attributable to the banal vanities of his clientele.

Well, enough of my indignant polemic ... let's segue to the technical issues of craft.

Commonly taught in all the finest 19th Century Academies was the underlying gird of Euclidian geometry later termed dynamic symmetry by the Yale University professor Jay Hambidge in the early 1900's.

Presented in evidence is Gérôme's *The Cock Fight*, 1846, which is predicated on a  $\sqrt{2}$  dynamic rectangle (A 1.4142 ratio).



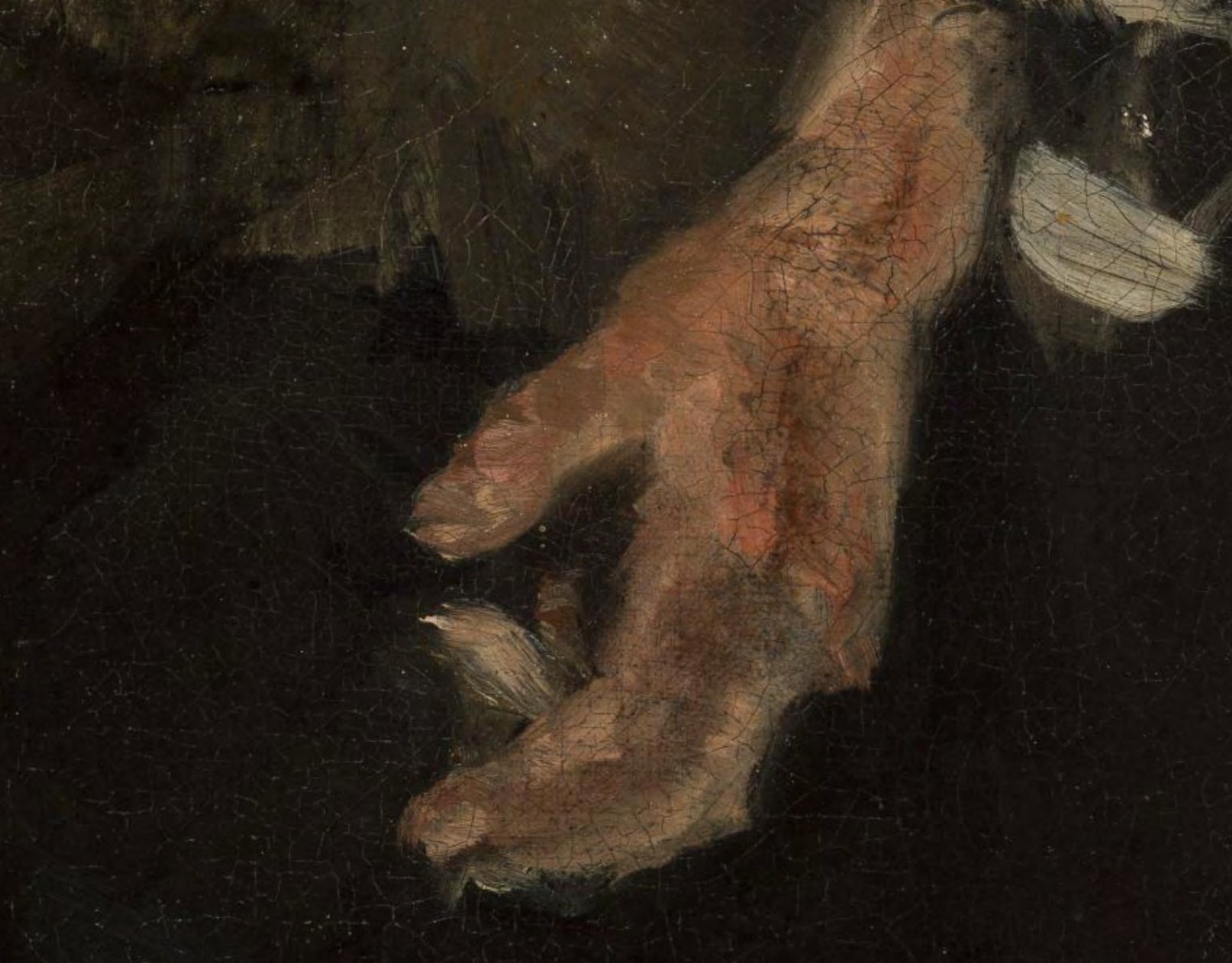
Duveneck's underlying geometry, too, is direct. Had he not aped the academic mediocrities of his time this could have been a painting of some merit

What presence *The Water Carriers* carries (no alliteration intended) is owed to the underlying pictorial divisions of harmonious space. Yep, dynamic symmetry.



Duveneck's apotheosis came early in his career. *Whistling Boy*, 1872, possesses a startling flash of genius in the treatment of the head. The remainder of the painting not so much.

In my humble opinion, Duveneck's head rivals the best of Manet and Sargent. Sadly he never quite managed to revisit that summit of first rank painting.



It is in unfinished master paintings that insightful lessons are proffered. Shown here is the initial practice of spotting color value notes. It is a high sculptural approach wherein the forms are built up applying the paint as if they were colored pieces of clay.

This is a much more powerful and convincing approach than the academic practice of coloring-in a transferred preparatory drawing. It has presence.

With oil paint it is well-advised to begin a little bit darker and warmer than the final intent. It is much more efficient and cleaner to later lighten a value than it is to darken it. The same goes with temperature: much better to warm up a cool value. That way you avoid the demoralizing result of color collapsing into a muddy horror.



The Munich school stressed the practice of beginning a painting by first minimally striking the big shapes with a few succinctly drawn lines and serving up the half-tones in the abstract.

Serving it up in the abstract means distilling the head to its basic planar components quite similar to slapping clay onto an armature.

Employing a severely limited palette of white, yellow ochre, indian red and black and wielding a large brush render your brush strokes with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical structures.

Admittedly, most students find this approach damnably difficult to master

at first and will scamper back to the coddling assurances of coloring-in a preparatory drawing. Frankly, that is a sure road to academic mediocrity. Nothing worthwhile comes easy.

Yes, I know, I know ... them's fighting words! Most of Sargent's students could not grasp this concept. Perhaps it was Sargent's failings as an instructor.

On the other hand, the early 20th Century artist/teacher Charles Hawthorne had his students paint their mud-faces with a plasterer's trowel. Hawthorn's teachings produced many fine painters who formed the core of American painting. Amongst them were Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe and Edwin Dickenson (illustrated here is an example from 1938 of Dickenson serving it up in the abstract).



From the general, loosely abstracted ébauche the facial forms are developed asymptotically. Accuracy begetting greater accuracy.

This is painting with a sculptural sensibility. I thicken my paint with calcite, an inert extender that stabilizes thickly applied paint rheologically, to where it feels like clay.

With brush, knife and fingers the paint is pushed and pulled until a satisfactory resolution is achieved.

This approach gives a painting presence. It is much more than merely a painted head.

The green strokes laid upon the jowl are a device of Ruben's. Painting is a language whose syntax has evolved over the centuries. There is nothing new under the sun. Powerful expres-



sion is made manifest and informed by those who came before you.

Duveneck visited the whistling boy theme several times, regrettably he fell back into the trap of academic rendering. Instead of a powerful painterly presence the remainder of his whistling oeuvre is more akin to coy calendar art than fine art.

Oil paint is a bodied medium whose expressive presence lay with the expression of a painting's surface of autographic mark making and patina—thick and thin passages. Generally the lights are applied thickly and with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical form. The darks thin.



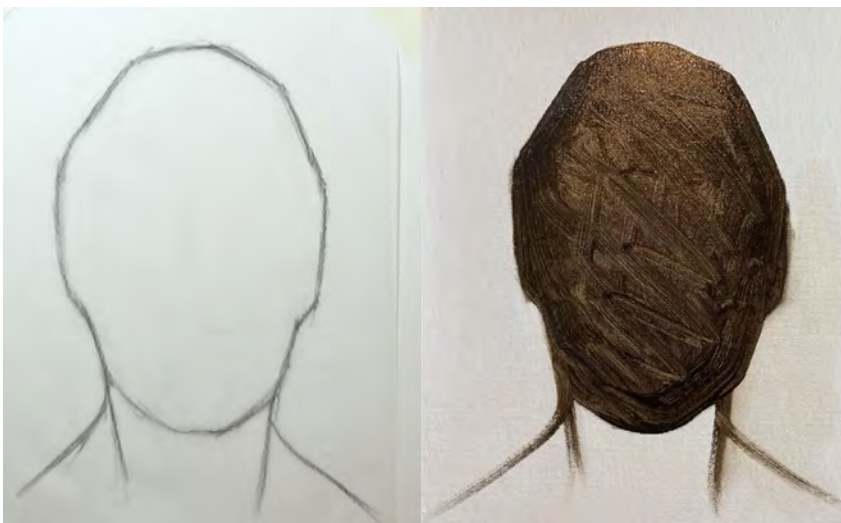
This is the abstract structural surface.

The layered construction of a painting begins with selection of your canvas. My preference is for the 11 x 14" canvas, a dynamic rectangle, which is a  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  (the square root of the golden number). Dynamic rectangles proffer a direct conduit to the viewer's unconscious mind and are an immediate step-up in your painting.

My imprimaturi (the initial toning of the canvas) is applied gesturally. This activates the canvas with an electrical charge: energy.

Drawing is essentially about shape: how tall, how wide and what are the angles. I reference the initial big shape as 'striking the arabesque'. It implies gesture and rhythm. Terminology implies intent.

First, though, the big shape need be placed harmoniously within the canvas. Composition. A simple erector set of rabatements (placing a square onto the end of your canvas), corresponding arcs and diagonals affix the head. Simplicity in and of itself is meaningless. However, a simplicity rendered through a wall of complexity often defines beauty.



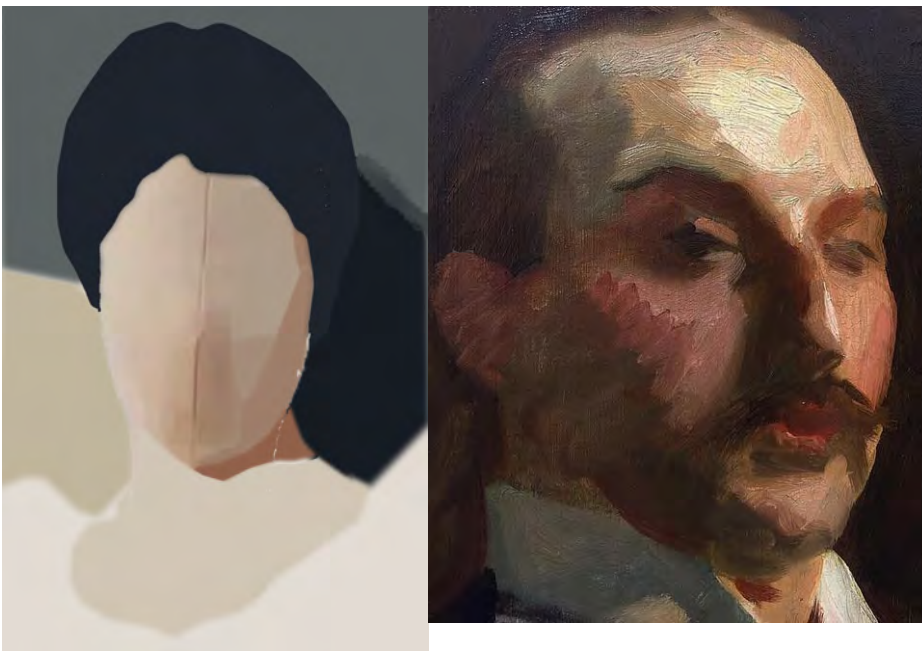
Striking is an acquired skill. John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins spent many a late night in the cast hall developing their striking skills until, particularly in Sargent's case, they could strike with a laser precision. You need to do the work. There are no short cuts. I teach this critical skill in my [Fundamentals of Portrait Drawing: Module 1: Shape & Proportion](#).

From the big shape I carve the planar forms, serving up the half-tones in the abstract. This is painting with a sculptural sensibility.

There are two modes of painting: the illustrative (coloring-in a preparatory drawing) which led Duveneck astray and mired in mediocrity and the painterly which, had Duveneck stuck to his brushes, would have secured his place in the pantheon of American art.

My agenda is to replicate this whistling boy with the painterly/sculptural approach taught at the Royal Academy of Art in Munich in the mid to late 19th Century.

Serving up the half-tones in the abstract (Sargent's words) is a process of broadly tiling the primary planar structures of the head using only three to four half-tones differentiated by both value and temperature. The features are a secondary consideration and roughly inferenced. Sargent recommended his students to spend at least a week modeling a head without the features: "That way you'll learn something about the structure of the head."



Sargent's process of serving up the half-tones in the abstract began with a structural wig-makers mount-like rendering of the facial forms. From there the planar forms would evolve sculpturally incorporating the expression and the facial features suggested with a succinct economy of means..

Thick, clay-like paint is my preference. It can readily be pushed and pulled by brush, knife and fingers.

Calcite or marble dust strengthens the paint and facilitates the drying time. A drop of egg yolk into the medium adds a touch of lustre.

Timing, too, plays a role. Often it is provident to allow the paint to partially set-up giving it a more clay-like quality that facilitates the knitting of the planar edges. Particularly the interplay of cool and warm passages.

My agenda was to render Duveneck's illustrative whistling boy with a painterly, sculptural approach for comparison's sake. As artists we have decisions to make, good and bad. Whether to pursue an illustrative or painterly path is a big one ultimately dependant on one's timber.



The underlying erector of my painterly study is predicated on the overlapping Rabatements (a square mounted on the end of the canvas, noted as '1') and their respective arcs.

Composition, the placement of the head, is defined by intersection points (erector sets). **A** is the intersection of the top rabatement and arc wherein a vertical division is defined and the side of the face determined. **B** places the top of the head..

The mental protuberance (chin) is placed at the lower rabatement. **C** and **D** determine the swing of the hat's brim.

A portrait painting begins with the arabesque (the big shape) and ends with the arabesque. Throughout the layered process of painting the arabesque is rigorously corrected and refined.

When something feels off about the painting it can usually be attributed to a faulty arabesque and misplaced landmarks such as the brow ridge (frontal orbital eminence) and the anterior nasal spine (the base of the nose). Of course, a misplaced, mis-angled interstice of the mouth will skew the expression immeasurably.

The awful truth is that it is impossible to repaint a head whose infrastructure is wrong. Better to scrape it down and begin anew.

In alla prima portrait painting the arabesque determines the successful interior construction of the facial planes and, subsequently, the expression.

Of course, there will be deviations. Sargent would often deliberately swing the interstice off of the facial angle rendering a charmingly wistful expression.

Shown here is my demonstration from the recently concluded Summer of Alla Prima workshops. My reference was a drawing of Sargent's.

No sooner was the final coda of cadmium red slashed onto the brim of the hat I gathered up my paints and brushes and was Manila bound for an extended workshop of alla prima at Galvez Atelier, an ARC accredited institution.

Following are notes taken by Julie Heyneman, a student of Sargent's. Pin these notes to your studio wall. The advice given is invaluable.



## Sargent's Notes

1. Painting is an interpretation of tone. Colour drawn with a brush.
2. Keep the planes free and simple, drawing a full brush down the whole contour of a cheek.
3. Always paint one thing into another and not side by side until they touch.
4. The thicker your paint—the more your color flows.
5. Simplify, omit all but the most essential elements—values, especially the values. You must clarify the values.
6. The secret of painting is in the half tone of each plane, in economizing the accents and in the handling of the lights.
7. You begin with the middle tones and work up from it . . . so that you deal last with your lightest lights and darkest darks, you avoid false accents.
8. Paint in all the half tones and the generalized passages quite thick.
9. It is impossible for a painter to try to repaint a head where the understructure was wrong.



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