Painter's Tech—Sketches

two keys to the successful portrait

Of the myriad ways of drawing and painting the portrait there are two keys present throughout: shape recognition and anatomy. They work hand-in-hand.

Painting is essentially a compendium of arranged colored shapes. The viewer's eye interprets colored shape into concrete form, i.e., an eye or a mouth.

That seems easy enough. Alas we are burdened with the curse of symbolic preconceptions. We tend to paint what we think we see rather than the reality of what is. A large part of a painter's training is the subjugation of these nefarious preconceptions. Looking and seeing is a precarious balancing of perception and expression.

In my practice rendering studies in different media proffers deeper insights. Thomas Eakins would often do oil studies for his watercolor paintings. It worked well for him.

I work the other way around.

Whereas my oil painting is grounded in the plastic (giving form to) materiality of the Munich School (re: Chase, Duveneck, Sargent, *et al*), my watercolor tends toward the illustrative academic approach of L'Ecole des Beaux Arts (re: Gérôme, Eakins).

Michael Britton, *Study for La Bohèmienne*, Watercolor, 2026

Art making is often a process of working through a wall of complexity striving to synthesize an elegant simplicity and unity.

This early cobalt blue watercolor study for *La Bohèmienne* has gone a tad too far with the underlying geometry. It is unnecessarily complex. Involute.

Both methods share the same foundation of solid drawing and construction of interior form, namely shape.

In watercolor I forego a preliminary drawing that is transferred onto my Arches cold-pressed paper (medium texture). In my earlier days, long, long ago, I would do a preliminary drawing. As I trundle into hoary old age, and having worked out an idea of the composition, I plunge right in with a sharp 2H graphite pencil. Damn the torpedoes!

The initial blocking in with cobalt blue relies heavily on shape recognition and the anatomical structure. Watercolor can be unforgiving. Like a chaste in-law easily given to moral umbrage. It is the most difficult of all the mediums.

Learning to paint well is a layered approach. So, too, is the practice of painting. Whether it be a sustained work or an alla prima the painter is well advised to have a strategy.

For a singular portrait painting I introduce my students to the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic canvas (the square root of the golden rectangle—the 11 x 14" fits the bill) which is the primary shape. Within that canvas the head is placed and the arabesque struck—the shape/gesture that defines the likeness and expression.

Striking the arabesque—or contour or mapping or blocking, whatever you wish to call it—is the core skill of portrait drawing and painting. It is not an insurmountable skill to acquire if taught well. You begin with a few dynamic rectangles—how wide, how tall. A month or two of dedicated study does the job. Take advantage of my **two-week free trial offer** and get your foundation under your belt!

The structuring of the facial elements within the arabesque is the more difficult path. It is here that the battle between perception (the good guys) and symbolic preconceptions (the bad guys) reaches a fever pitch.

The bad guys are sneaky. Given half a chance they'll infect your painting, planting their banal symbols helter skelter, weakening your portrait.

Two keys to ward off the insidious plague of symbolic preconceptions are a knowledge of facial anatomy and shape recognition. They work hand-in-hand.

Anatomy grants an understanding of structure and function. Shape recognition hones structure into expression.

My teaching instructs students to seek out triangles within the facial interiority. A triangle presents only three points of reference to plumb and place, much easier than rectangles. Additionally there are only three triangles to seek out: the equilateral, the isoceles and the less common right-angled.

The primus of painting is always ... always ... general to specific. Accuracy to greater accuracy. Seek out the large triangles first. The *zygomatic process* (frontal aspect of the cheek) pretty much always presents a triangle. From there ... triangles beget triangles.

Of course triangles are not salvation, but they are an excellent aid to guide you on the challenging journey of portrait painting.

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part 2 : shape recognition

A painting's journey is seldom straight forward. There are always twists and turns. Many of them unforeseen no matter your skill level.

My intention for *La Bohèmienne* is an oil painting whose brushwork—the abstract structural surface—is cogent with the subject. My attack must appear effortless. An illustrative, academic approach will not cut the mustard.

That will require an economy of means. Every brush stroke will have to serve several purposes.

One could blithely assault the canvas with a flurry of brush work and hope for the best, but that rarely, if ever, works. Even alla prima requires a strategy.

Watercolor portraits rely heavily on shape recognition. Each piece of a wash is laid in as if it were a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. You can play with the edges with water, but take care not to lose definition.

Michael Britton, *Study for La Bohèmienne*, Watercolor, 2026

When resolving the interiority of facial expression triangles, again, are excellent guides. Particularly when combined with an understanding of the anatomy.

Frankly, I am not happy with this study. The parallel strands of hair falling across her face do not work. They are a distraction. A better solution need be found. And don't get me started on that bilious background!

The purpose of a study is to both rehearse and fix a pathway forward. Having suffered the watercolor I am well-acquainted with the facial forms of this specific expression.

An open mouthed gesture presents a litany of hurdles—the labial tractor, the muscle arrangement of the muzzle, is the painter's nemesis. Particularly that damn marionette line defined by the *depressor anguli oris*. It never looks right. Too soft and the expression is lost; too hard and the expression becomes harsh. And, yes, I know, I know, I haven't quite got it. Yet.

But having done the watercolor study I am much more familiar with its subtleties. Better armed to tackle it in oil.

The next step is the pochade(s) in oil. Small thumbnail sketches wherein I will refined both the underlying geometry and color scheme. Stay tuned!

Module 2 of my Portrait Painting Foundations Program focuses on the features of the head. Here you become learned in both the anatomy and structures of facial expression.

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