Painter's Tech—Sketches

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.

Michael Britton, *Harlequin II*, 2022

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. That's what you want.

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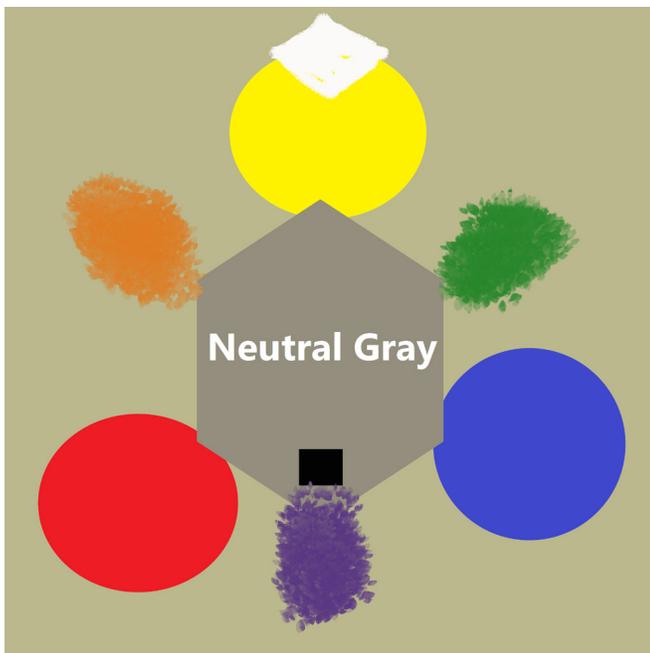
The holy grail of flesh tones is the Neutral Gray zone. You arrive there via complementaries: yellow/violet, blue/orange, red/green.

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.

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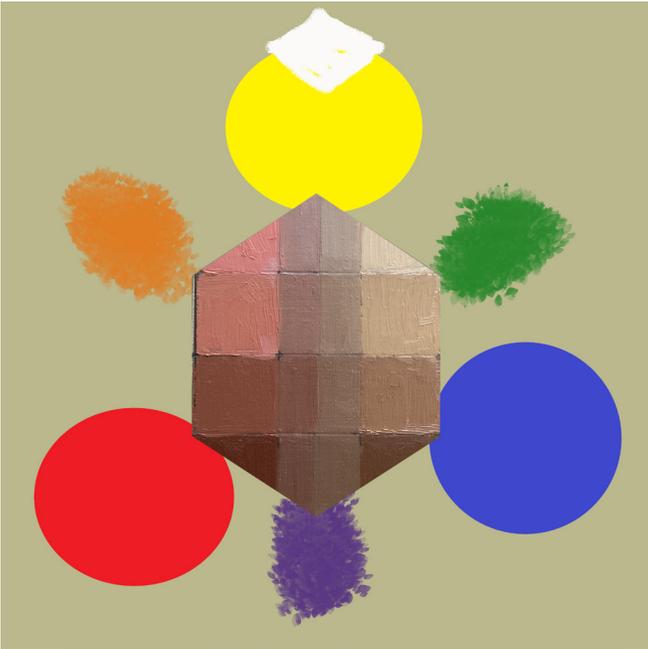
As facial form turns into, and away, from the light it's value will change correspondingly. As a form/plane turns toward the light it requires TINT. However, as you tint you need to also add a touch of chroma otherwise you will chalk out and, as with any major exsanguination, the prognosis is dire.

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.

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For white I use Cremnitz or flake white. It's an expensive paint. For students I recom-
mend 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.
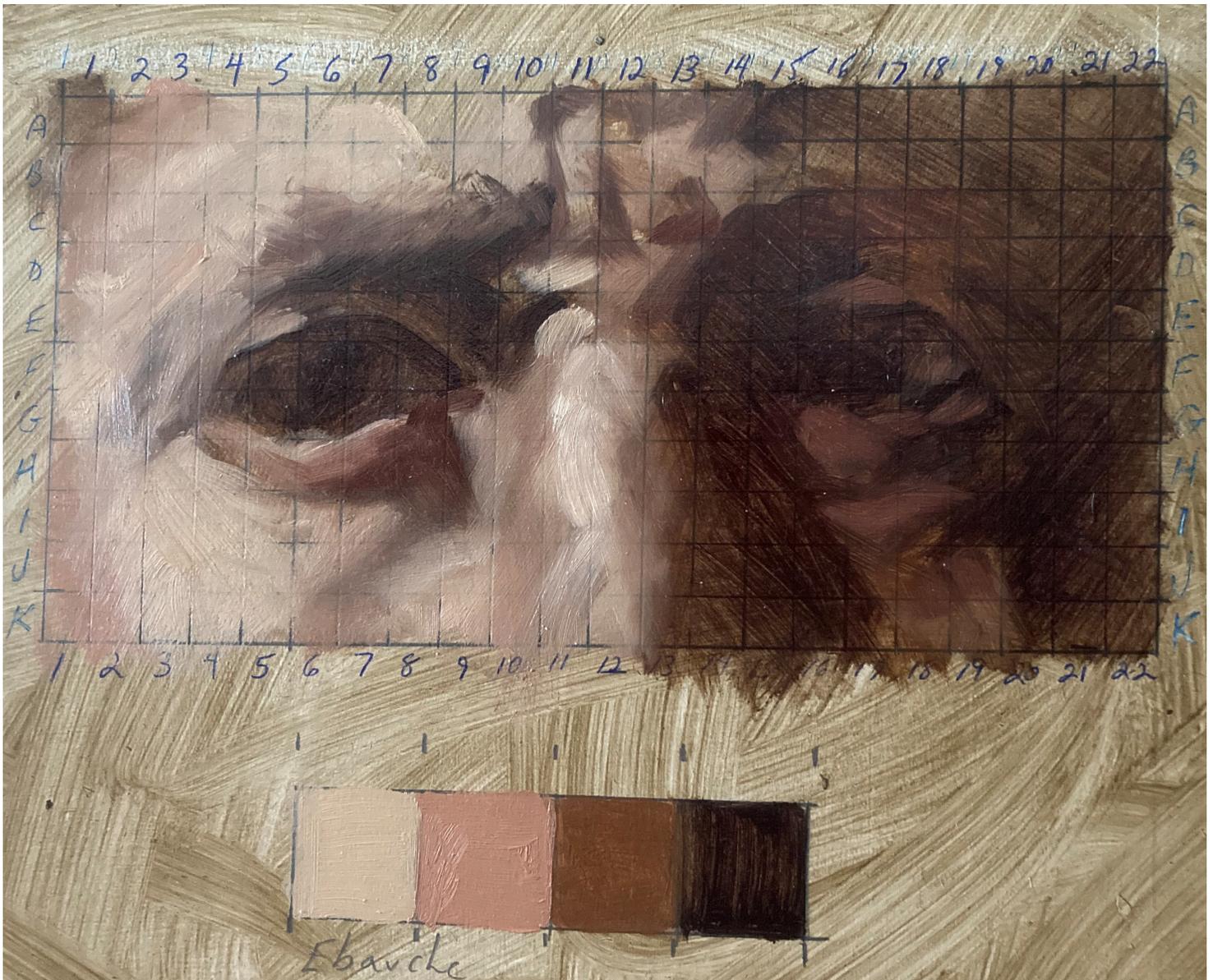
A painting's start (the Ébauche) is well served with this limited palette. Once the shape of the arabesque and interior structures are struck and blocked in—using a semi-transparent mixture of black/red—a range of three values are mixed: a light, a middle value and a dark light value. Temperature is 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.

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 workaday 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.

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.

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