

Painter's Tech—Sketches

finding the edge



Gustave Courbet, *Woman in the Waves*, 1868

Trot on up the grand staircase at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and head straight to Gallery 811. Steel yourself to be scandalized.

The goddess of the sea, Venus, is depicted with under-arm hair! Oh mon dieu!

Amongst many things, had this painting not met the criteria of Unity it would have quickly fallen into obscurity. This canvas is a $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle. The square root of the golden rectangle.

Woman in the Waves is regarded as a pivotal piece in the evolution of 19th Century painting.

Successful paintings present a unified whole of which drawing, color and composition are the primary conduits of expression.

The focus of this issue of Tech-Sketches is the initial four lines of your composition—the dimensions of your canvas.

Historically there are two determinants of canvas dimensions: the Octavo (in eighth) and the Dynamic. Quite often the two are conjoined.

There is a third determinant, the expedient, that is ever popular in art schools and ateliers, but dooms your painting to failure before the first brush stroke is applied. That is the 16x20" canvas. Neither an Octavo nor Dynamic it is static. Dead on arrival.

The infernal 16x20" and its diminutive companion, 8X10", is readily available in every art store because it sells. It is the go-to canvas sullyng the supply lists of far too many painting classes and workshops.

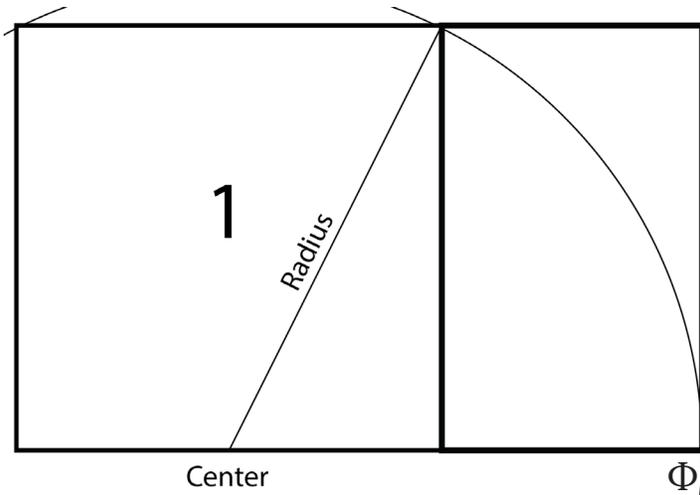
Less I work myself up into a fit of apoplexy and spill my beverage let's move on ...

A dynamic canvas that is particularly well suited for head studies and tronies (character studies) is the 11 x 14".

This canvas is the square root of the golden rectangle denoted as $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (1.272).

It is highly recommended for beginning and intermediate painters. It begins the journey of sensitizing your eye to dynamic relationships.

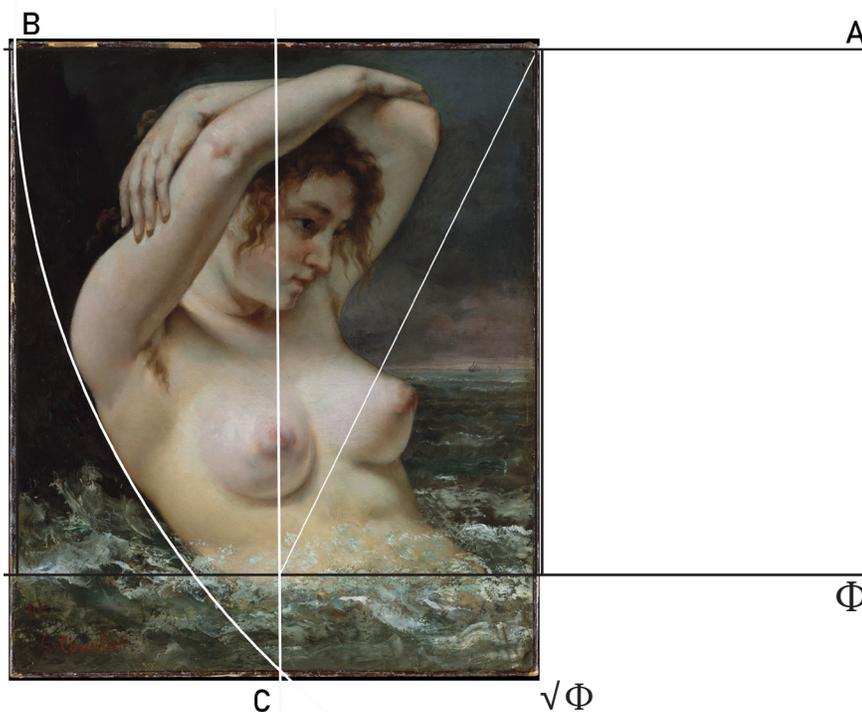
It's a cryin' shame that most art schools and ateliers pay short thrift to this subject. Of course your drawing and painting skills should be developed to a high level, but it is the canvas edges and the harmonious divisions of pictorial space that encapsulate your narrative and grabs your viewers' souls by the gills.



The golden rectangle is readily constructed from drawing a diagonal from the center of the square's base to the upper corner.

The diagonal becomes the radius of a circle whose arc meets the extended baseline of the square.

The ratio of the golden rectangle is 1.618. That's the number of the world's soul (*Timaeus*, Plato) and the number (i.e., Fibonacci sequence) that runs the computer you're reading this on.



An efficient way to construct the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ rectangle is to employ the top of the Φ rectangle (AB) as a radius of a circle, drop the center line of your original square and where the two meet down at C you got your $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle.

Pretty nifty!

And that's not all ... the viewer's unconscious mind latches onto this universal ordering and is pleased and engaged.

The painting stays with you.



The alla prima portrait has a time constraint. Usually anywhere from 2½ to 4 hours, less model breaks. There's no time to waste. Tick-tock, tick-tock.

It's a real bummer to pull off a nice alla prima whose head is misplaced on a poorly chosen canvas.

You could restretch the canvas later to better effect the composition. But, frankly, that never works well. What's usually accomplished is skinned knuckles.

It's the devil to restretch painted canvas.

An elegant solution within the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (11x14") canvas is to first establish the Rabatement. That's placing a square onto the top end of the canvas.

Two intersecting rabatement arcs fix the top of the head at **A**.

Two diagonals from the bottom corners to the vertical mid-points places the chin (mental protuberance) at **B**. And voila, voila!

Then it's a matter of striking the arabesque, serving up the half-tones in the abstract ... break for coffee and idle chit-chat ... and then pulling out the facial forms with bravura brush strokes applied concordantly to the underlying facial form. All of which are taught at **PORTRAIT PAINTER TV**.

If you missed a Tech-Sketch lesson they are all online at artacademy.com.

