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Alla Prima—Painting from Photographs

A tronie is an informal character study whose appeal often lies in the material exuberance of paint veiled with a touch of melancholia. Think of Frans Hals, Velazquez' court jesters, and Sargent.

More often than not it was a tronie that drew you into the fold of portrait painting. The best are painted with a beguiling effortlessness, merely snatched from the teeming mob of humanity and bestowed with an engaging empathetic singularity of spirit.

A successful tronie is built upon the ruins of many failed paintings. There's no way around it. The painting game depends on acres of canvas to nourish a few excellent works. Alas, technical wizardry alone is not enough; nor will erstwhile emotive outpouring manage a striking work. A balance needs to be found. And every painting determines its own metric. sun, art making is often a re-interpretation infused with one's world vision.

Underpinning all good art is sound structure. The narrative requires a cohesive whole. In painting that is your layer cake of pictorial divisions, drawing, Notan, color and the abstract structural surface of the paint.

With a limited palette of flake white, naples yellow, vermillion, indian red and vine black and a copious supply of turpentine tempered with a touch of poppy oil, I first placed the head and struck the arabesque—the whole outside shape which establishes both the gesture and the likeness.



Painting alla prima demands a clear strategy. The arabesque struck (that takes about twelve to fifteen seconds, if that) I first block-in the ground, the background. Color is interactive, one color affects another like an inconsiderate neighbor with poor taste in loud music. The ground sets up the flesh tones. i.e., a green ground will push the flesh tones toward red. A blue ground toward orange. Simultaneous contrast.

Establishing the facial structure is paramount. You need to look past the features to the constructive elements of form. As if you were sculpting in clay.

Always perched in my hand and at the ready are my measuring stick (a sharpened wood stylus) and plumb line. At regular intervals I re-assess my measures. Things tend to stray and the leash needs to be asserted. Pin pricks fix the important landmarks such as the anterior nasal spine and medial canthus. Learn your anatomy! It's important.

At this early stage the head should resemble a wig-maker's block from which the portrait emerges.

Adding calcium carbonate, both an extender and a siccative, to my colors vastly hastens the drying time.

My preference is for a thicker, more malleable paint which is achieved with a 50/50 proportion of calcium carbonate to oil paint. That's the maximum.

However, if you're using student grade paints you'll have to forego the calcium carbonate.

At the first break while the model saunters toward the day's tepid coffee I expand my palette to a full working range and prep my colors.

Alla prima uses up a lot of paint. Don't be stingy! Don't starve your palette.

Paint with a sculptural sensibility. My brush is wielded like a sculptor's trowel with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical structure. Both the figure and ground are brought up simultaneously.

Drawing errors begin to manifest like an errant daughter stealing into her lair at the first impression of rose-fingered dawn.

Don't blithely paint over such offensive offenders. Scrape it out with your palette knife and structure it anew. Not only is it cleaner and technically sound, it's also more expedient timewise. Tick, tock ... this is alla prima.

Your primary agenda is structure. Once the structure has been solidly set then the gaze and nodes of the mouth are indicated. Invariably they will be off. Expect that. Once in a very rare while you will have a lucky, lucky day and nail them to wall.

But less you celebrate too soon, assiduously verify both their vertical relationship and the horizontal alignment with your plumb line. Subtleties of expression are defined by the relationship of iris to node, or commissure, of the mouth.

As the clock ticks cruelly toward the conclusion of the session and panic envelops the painting class like a malificent fog, my agenda is to strive for the full stretch of light to dark and cool to warm. Edges are knitted and hardened as dictated by the pose and gesture.

Details, such as a nostril or the corneal highlight, will not save you. The awful, awful truth is that the battle was either won or lost in the intermediate passage of building up the facial structure.

The attraction of alla prima is it's seemingly unencumbered immediacy. Resist the temptation to pull your alla prima into a studied studio painting. They are different animals.

Painting the Alla Prima Portrait from Photographs

Supply List:

An 11 x 14" canvas or panel toned with a light imprimaturi of burnt sienna or yellow ochre and a very small amount of vine or ivory black.

The imprimaturi activates the surface of the canvas. It can either be stroked on vertically or in an abstract expressionist manner. Use a very light medium (5 : 1).

Oils: flake white or titanium/zinc white, a pale yellow (i.e., titanium nickel yellow or lead tin yellow or lemon yellow, yellow ochre (pale is good, too), vermillion (or cadmium red medium), burnt sienna, Indian red, cadmium green light (or permanent green light), terre verte (green earth), raw umber and vine or ivory black. Plus whatever colors are in your kit.

Optional: Calcium carbonate (available in most art stores) if you are using professional grade pigments. Do NOT use with student grade paints.

Solvent: Linseed oil or poppy oil, stand oil, turpentine OR if you're intolerant of turpentine use Painters' Mayonnaise—one part egg yolk : one part white vinegar : five parts oil. Shake well until emulsified. Keep refrigerated. Good for one week.

Brushes: A range of medium size round and/or filberts.

Misc.: Rag, paint dipper for medium, wood palette preferred, two painting knives

Download the B/W photo reference: artacademy.com/tv/5000.png

I recommend that the reference image be printed out on a high quality photo paper to the size of your canvas, but not larger.

