

# Reality is part of art. Feeling completes it.

## Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796 - 1875)

Corot was not a preternaturally gifted painter. There was no father, uncle or family friend to guide him in the fundamentals of painting in his tender, adolescent years of awkward tribulations. His mother, however, was a fashionable milliner from whom Corot may have been instilled with a sense of design.

Like Van Gogh and Francis Bacon he came late into painting at 26 years old. Like many middle class young men he was dragooned into an apprenticeship, a draperier, of which he had little interest and which, pretty much, ground his soul to dust.

I picture the young Corot as a Holden Caulfield, Salinger's protagonist in *The Catcher in the Rye*. He won no prizes for scholastic achievement; no special honors came his way; not even a mention in his drawing class; another invisible youth shirking social engagements and women. He never formed a long term attachment—no wife, no girlfriend, no nothing. Just a mouthful of ashes.

Corot came to painting out of boredom, desperately grasping for a tether to still him from sinking deeper into the desiccated ruins of his youth as he approached that age of responsibility. At 26 he had drifted too far and was no longer, if he ever was, a young man of promise. There are no mentions of friendships in his biographies, it seems that the succubus of loneliness was his constant companion.

Despite his aloneness he never surrendered to misanthropy. In his later years his generosity was immense; upon learning that Daumier was blind and homeless he bought him a home in Auvers and was always willing to help artists in distress. Of which there were many.



Corot, *Young Greek Woman (Emma Dobigny)*, 1870-71

After the death of his older sister, Marie-Francoise, in 1822, his father acceded to Corot's wishes to pursue painting and bequeathed him a yearly allowance of 1,500 francs. This trust was more than adequate to finance his painting career, a studio on fashionable quai Voltaire, materials and travel expenses for the entirety of his life.

Imagine that. Most of us are lucky to have four, perhaps six years, of somewhat fettered freedom to pursue our painting dreams—and then the bill comes due with a crushing blow and we are dragged howling indignant protestations from our easel and plunked and chained like a galley slave before a never-ending stream of spreadsheets.

With many a jingle in his pocket and nary a financial worry Corot began his studies with Achille Etna Michallon, Corot's coeval and a prodigy from the atelier of Jacques-Louis David. I suspect that he studied privately with Michallon, there is nothing to indicate that Corot sauntered up the few blocks to the Ecole-des-Beaux-Arts to attend classes.

Alas, Corot's studies with Michallon were cut short due to Michallon's untimely death at 25 years. Pneumonia.

Michallon could have been one of the great ones. Perhaps. Perhaps. He was a landscape painter steeped in the Neo-classical school whose agenda was ideal Beauty manifested in nature and presented in an idealized ancient time when men were men, and scantily clad young women traipsed giddily through sylvan stands of slender oaks after an enervating Sunday brunch, and gladiators could always be counted upon to put on a good show.



Jean-Victor Bertin, *View of Ile de France*, c. 1810-13

As late as the 1860's Corot was still inserting nymphs into his compositions. One critic lamented: "If M. Corot would kill, once and for all, the nymphs of his woods and replace them with peasants, I should like him beyond measure." There! You see! I am not the only one who casts a gimlet eye on prancing trollops in painting.





Corot, *Trees in a Swamp*, c. 1860

After Michallon's demise Corot continued his studies with the Neo-Classicalist, Jean-Victor Bertin, who, for a time, had been Michallon's teacher. Neo-Classicism's time in the sun was waning but it still held a powerful sway and still does today in the pedagogy of many academies.

The influence of Michallon and Bertin greatly informed Corot's love of plein air painting. And the world was changing. Then radical ideas of realism opened up new vistas of possibilities for Corot.

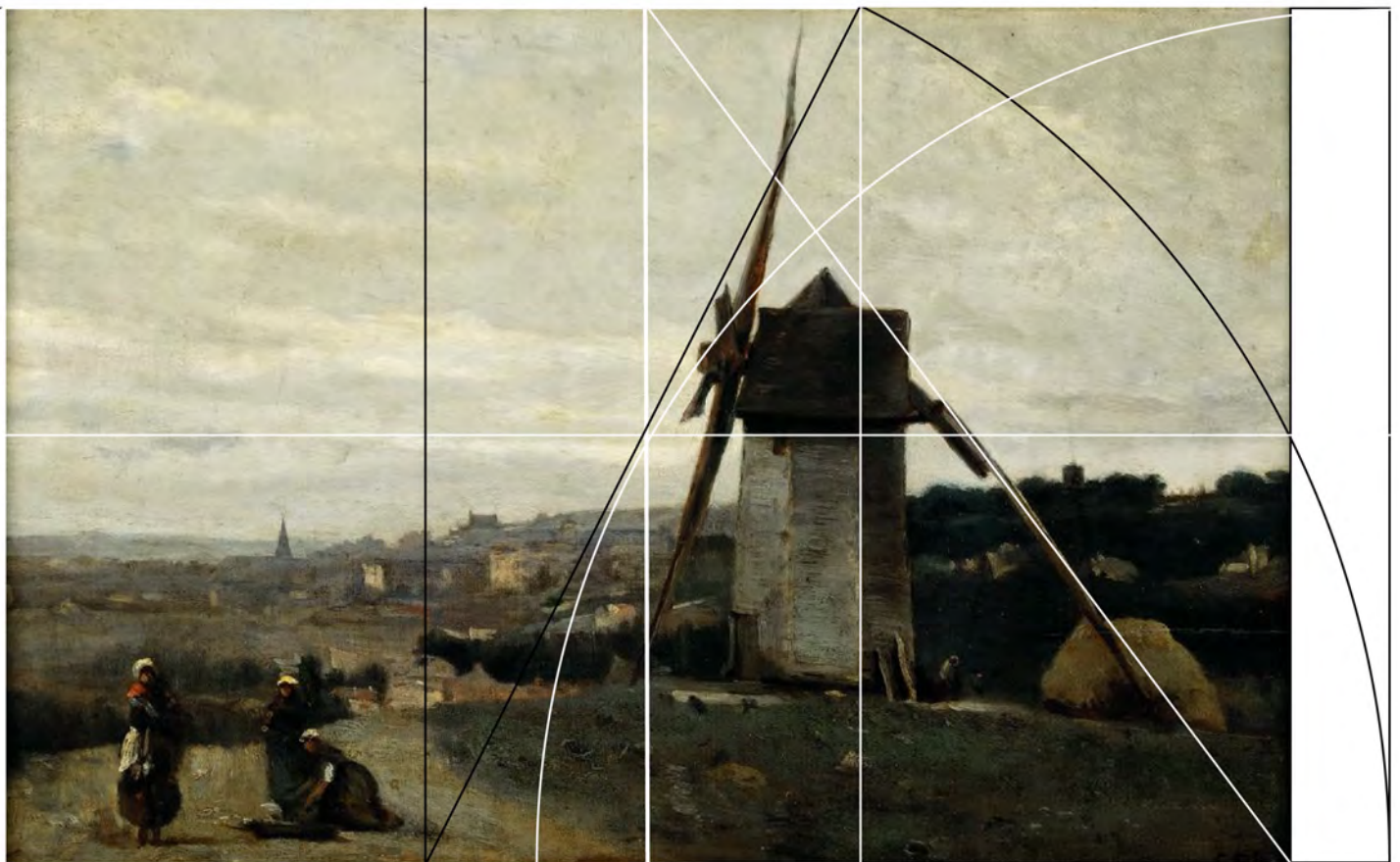
And, as is often the case with new possibilities, Corot struggled with synthesizing his neo-classical training with the new realism. It was this anguished ambiguity that formed the development of his voice and planted the seed of the plein air innovations of Impressionism

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The principal expressive modes of fine art are: architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry. Much of the power in Corot is the poetic element. Yes, yes, I know ... such a sentiment is readily dismissed as treacle in our jaded age ... nevertheless it bears looking into.

Architecture, sculpture and painting are the 'space' arts further defined as Line, Notan and Color.

**Line** determines the boundaries of shapes and interrelations of lines and spaces. Let's dig a little deeper here and delve into the architectural element of painting. Namely, the harmonious divisions of pictorial space. I've discussed a few of these elements in previous issues.



Corot, *Windmill at Étretat*, c. 1855-65, 15x23" (38.1x58.4cm)

Φ

At first look I thought this canvas was a  $\frac{2}{3}$  proportion. The ever popular 1.5 canvas. Nope. A quick jaunt to grab my calculator and the actual proportion is 1.5333. A niggling difference, perhaps. Consider a piano slightly out-of-tune—a melody banged out on those sorry ivories is soon dismissed. The same goes for painting, or any of the space arts for that matter.



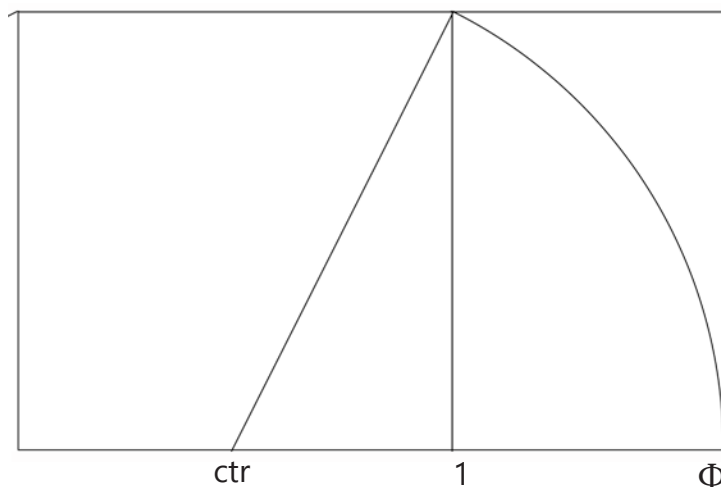
Corot was particularly finicky about the quality of his materials. Only the best of linens and paints would find their way into his studio. This is more than a conceit, if you don't respect your art, it won't respect you.

Many plein air painters have their preferred canvas shapes. Mine is the  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  (1.272). Corot not so much. His practice was to glue his paintings onto a supportive sheet of linen that was stretched after the fact onto precisely cut stretcher bars. Anyone who has priced the cost of fine Belgian linen would gasp at this practice. Myself, not having a symphony of extra jingle in my paucity pockets, I glue my canvas onto acid-free hardboard.

Given that neo-classicism is strongly predicated on the Greek ideals of harmonious divisions of space (Dynamic Symmetry), Corot undoubtedly would have been well trained in its application. So much so that he would 'feel' the divisions much like a musician feels the tuning of their instrument. Lugging one's gear and snacks about the country-side is burden enough without have to pack a geometry set too. Design is an acquired sensibility; good design is more than just good taste.

Although there are many possible approaches Corot could have taken in Windmill at Etretat, I settled on the cut-time of the golden rectangle  $\Phi$ . My analysis went swimmingly well until ... that infernally abstruse blade of the windmill. After a few stiff swills of whiskey I left it alone, deciding that it was a brilliant example of Corot's ingrained sense of design. More often than not, it is the simple and elegant solution to a problem that is the correct one.

This damn blade is also a poignant reminder that despite all of the wizardry of craft and technique they are only tools in your creative toolbox.



The Golden Rectangle is constructed by drawing a diagonal from the base-center point of a square; rendering that diagonal as a radius and affixing adjoining rectangle onto the original square. The proportion of the Golden Rectangle is 1.618 ( $\Phi$ ). This irregular number is the Number of the World's Soul (Plato, Timaeus)

Side note: The device your reading this on is predicated on the Fibonacci sequence whose gnomon is  $\Phi$ .



A line scheme underlies every Notan arrangement, and a Notan arrangement underlies every color composition.

In the hierarchy of a painting's construction the Notan plays a vital role.

Notan is a Japanese term meaning light/dark harmony. It is the Notan that sticks a painting to the wall.

A common refrain for successful painting is that the Whole be greater than the Sum of its parts.

We achieve this Whole through Unity.

Unity (Oneness, the Whole, or whatever term you prefer) is a result of bringing opposites into agreement – a correspondence of reconciliation.



Where there is Unity there is form – without Unity there is confusion – the form falls apart.

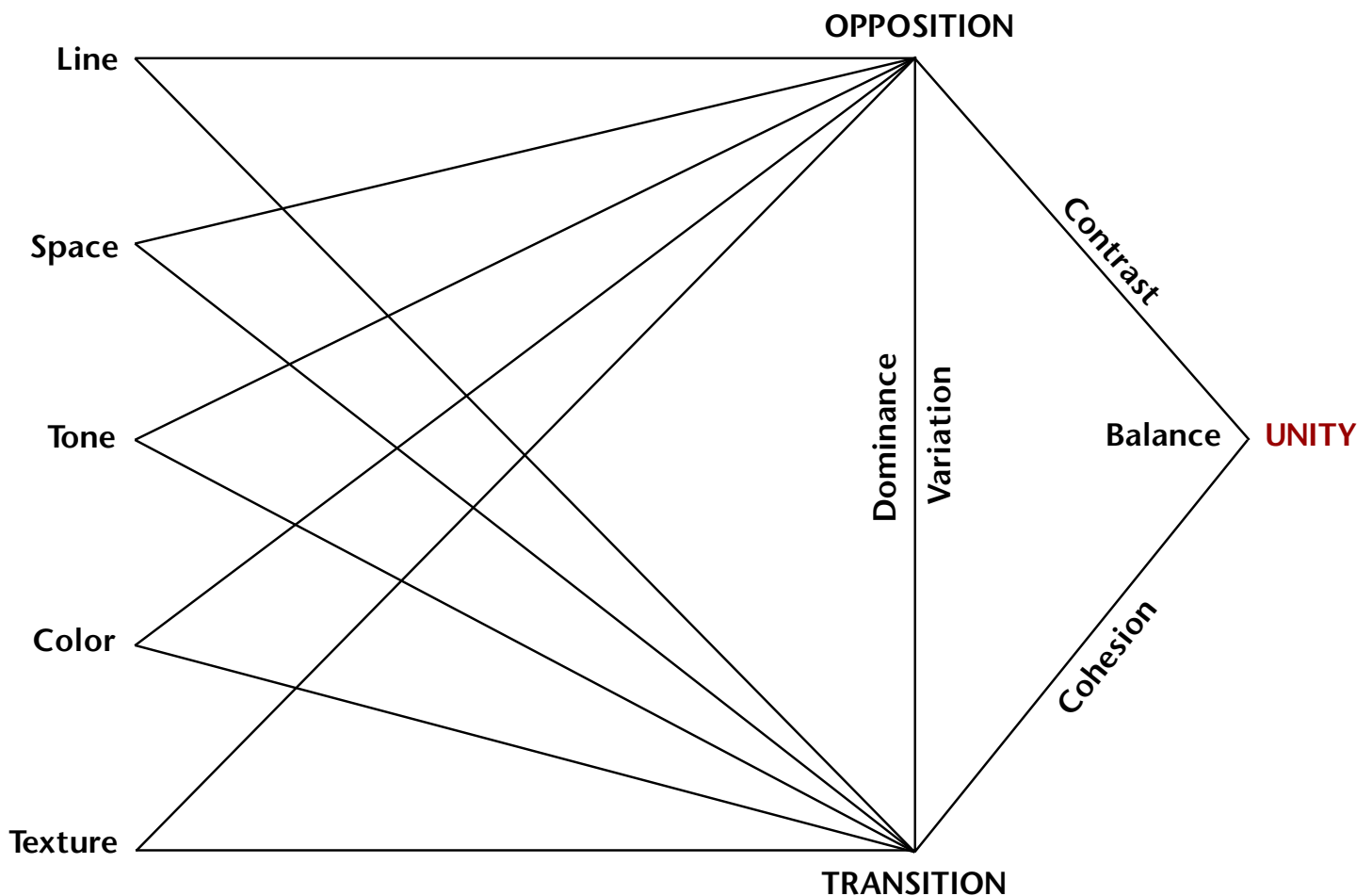
**Opposition** (balance) and **Transition** (cohesion) are the fundamental laws of **Unity**. Variation and Dominance, secondary but important, is the natural outcome of the reconciling effects of Opposition and Transition.

The **Principle of Transition** is the continuous process of construction/destruction and disintegration/integration. This constant fluctuation of transition animates form with movement and rhythm.

The **Principle of Opposition** is the natural dynamic of extremities that are complementary and exist as a positive/negative relationship. Oppositions that set the extremes of a form also lend balance. Transitional rhythms and repetitions knit Opposites together creating consistency and this interplay results in Dominance and Variety.

Having defined the fundamental laws of Unity we can examine them as they relate to the **Means of Expression**.

## Means of Expression + Fundamental Laws of Unity = FORM



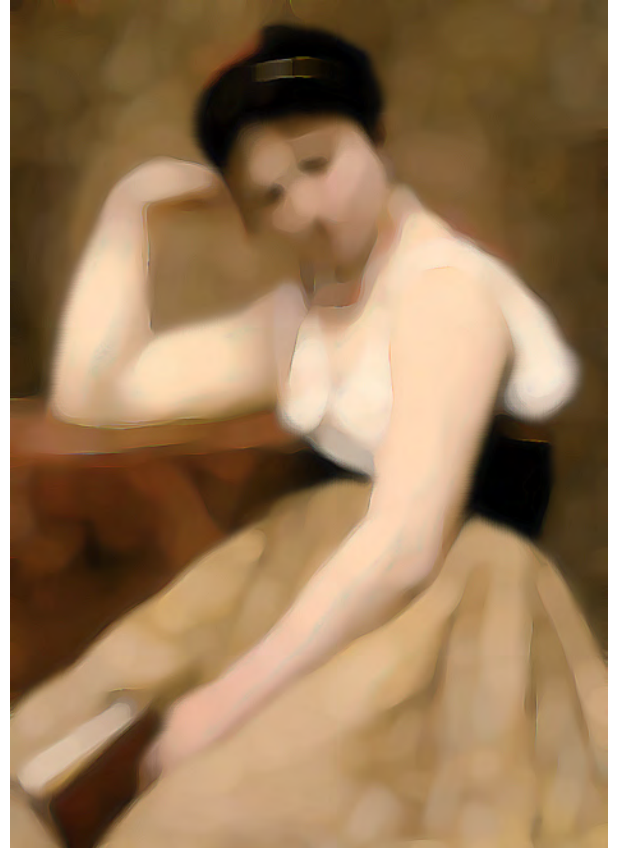


Corot, *Interrupted Reading*, 1870, 92.5 x 65.1 cm

Most beginners, and intermediate students too, dive right into the painting and soon find themselves mired in a litany of problems.

If you are going to spend 40 hours or a month or a year on a painting it is well advised to spend a few hours on preliminary studies. Good painting is a complex endeavor and as with any complex procedure it is best to take a layered approach to distill an idea/painting to its essential elements. You can always dress it up later, although no amount of dressing up will save a poor foundation.

Bear in mind that simplicity in and of itself is meaningless. Simplicity derived through a wall of complexity however ... well, then you got something!







At the very least your preliminary studies should include an idea of the underlying geometry (the skeleton or armature) which establishes the harmonious divisions of pictorial space; the Notan—your elements of Opposition/Transition vis-a-vis black/white harmony; and a pochade.

The pochade is a small thumbnail sketch which gives an idea of how your painting will look from a distance. The pochade is not a miniature version of the final painting. Keep it simple and direct. It usually

takes about three, sometimes seven, sometimes more, pochades to work out a good composition. The effort pays handsome dividends.

*Interrupted Reading* is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and they publish the dimensions as 92.5 x 65.1 cm. I'll assume those measures are accurate. The proportion works out to 1.42 which comes pretty darn close to  $\sqrt{2}$  (1.41). Given that canvas breathes and stretcher bars expand and shrink ... well, you be the judge.

Additionally, neither Staples nor Office Depot had yet arrived in Paris meaning jumbo geometry sets were unavailable. Tacks and twine were used to establish the diagonals and arcs determining the divisions, or *caesuras*.

Corot's geometry was a common chassis for a painting's understructure. The small image is Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Cock Fight*, 1846 which I deconstructed in the January issue.

There is an immediately felt lyricism to Corot's figurative paintings that Gérôme's lack.

Comparing similar works—I do try be fair—let's consider a few points:

Academically, Gérôme is the more accomplished draughtsman. His painting approach is illustrative and despite his technical wizardry Gérôme falls flat next to Corot's sculptural rendering of paint. There is synchronic solidity/dreaminess quality to Corot despite (or, perhaps, because of) his awkwardness of drawing. And here is the great divide between the technician and the artist.

The Notans of both paintings are equally strong. Let's call that a draw. No pun intended, of course.

Corot's painting utilizes a  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  skeletal understructure whereas Gérôme's painting is a 1.25 ratio, neither Octavol nor Dynamic, which is also that of the nefarious 16x20" canvas so popular in every portrait class. Gérôme's poor choice of canvas condemns his painting to the gallows of good intentions.. No matter how fine, how delicate, how wonderfully articulated his brush strokes, nothing can compensate for that dead canvas.

Instead of opting for a 16x20" for your portrait class I strongly suggest an 11x14" canvas which is a  $\sqrt{\Phi}$  dynamic rectangle and also readily available in every art store.

However, there is a caveat to my dialectical diatribe: at the end of the day, despite all of one's studiously acquired tools of painting, great art will always defy analysis. There is always that 'something else'.

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Corot, *Bacchante with a Panther*, 1860 reworked c. 1865-70, 95 x 55 cm

For most of his life, Corot kept his figurative paintings locked and hidden in his studio. They were only first exhibited as a group in 1910, thirty-five years after his death, which absolutely enthralled and subsequently informed the direction of the young Picasso and Cezanne.

Few artists have managed a one-two punch upon the trajectory of art. First, his landscapes paved the way to Impressionism; second, his figurative paintings had an immense influence on 20th Century art.

Corot was rent with an anguished ambiguity between the formal structures of Neo-classicism and the Romantic realism of Delacroix. Additionally the zeitgeist of the mid-19th Century's fascination with Orientalism played its role too. A *Bacchante* is a devotee of Bacchus (the god of wine and good times), a mythological, maybe not so mythological, bad girl given to exuberant romps, their bellies filled to the brim with cheap wine, their bras and panties cavalierly tossed aside and given to rank acts of violence perpetrated on small innocent creatures. Sometimes men—mouthy construction workers most likely—too would be savaged. Like many a Tinder date gone awry there is a dichotomy between eroticism and cruelty.





Left: Emma Daubigny, *The Greek Girl*  
Right: Agostina Segatori, *Interrupted Reading*

I suspect Corot yearned to be esteemed as more than a landscape artist, but he lacked the self-confidence to show his figural work in public. Another possible explanation is that Corot knew his figure paintings did not fit the academic (*L'Art Pompier*—an aspersions cast upon Gerome and fellow neo-classicists by the Impressionists) criteria of the official salon and feared damaging his reputation.

Emma Daubigny (1850-1925) is the face of Impressionism and Post-Impression. Upon the dissolution of her mother's marriage, Emma and her mother moved to Montmartre, Paris. It is reputed that it was Corot's suggestion that Emma work as a model albeit a vocation having a bad reputation. Modeling paid better than factory work or as a shop-clerk and was infinitely better than the brothels.

She was a terrible model. She couldn't sit still, she was an incessant chatterbox, and would even break out into song while posing. Nonetheless she endeared herself to many of the painters in Montmartre and modeling work afforded her a comfortable income. Edgar Degas nursed a twenty-year crush on young Emma.





Vincent van Gogh, *In the Café: Agostina Segatori in Le Tambourin*, 1887

Agostina Segatori (1841-1910) was another popular model in Montmartre. She hailed from Ancona, Italy and first posed for Manet at the tender age of nineteen in 1860. From there her modeling services as the Italian beauty were in constant demand. Corot, Gerome, Delacroix, Gauguin, Van Gogh were amongst her illustrious clients.

She saved her money and went into business opening the Cafe du Tambourin which became the hot-spot for exhibiting Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings and where many of the painters hung out. Including Van Gogh who was her lover for a short December-May romance (1886/87). I know, I know. Lonely Vincent had a girlfriend!? It ended badly.

Agostini accepted paintings in exchange for meals at her cafe and she built up an impressive collection. Unfortunately bankruptcy relieved her of her beloved paintings from which she never recovered and died a pauper in 1910.

*Though I constantly seek to imitate reality, I don't for one moment lose sight of the first impulse of emotion. Reality is part of art. Feeling completes it.*

Corot's figural works, unlike his plein air landscapes, have a sculptural quality. It is as if Corot carved the forms out of stone—they are still, permanent, neither wooden nor stiff.



The understructure of Corot, the geometric armature and the Notan, play an important role in conveying the emotional impact but they are felt, not seen.

What is seen and immediately felt is the **abstract structural surface** of the paint. Oil paint possesses a wondrous materiality that no other medium even comes close to matching.

Many students are afraid of oil paint: they assume it is more dangerous, more poisonous and difficult to work with. Frankly, the most dangerous medium is pastel, every stroke releases particles of pigment into the air, second is acrylic. That will come as a surprise to many but the chemical base of acrylic is formaldehyde. It is insidious, like carbon dioxide it has no odor, but nonetheless it is there to be inhaled into your lungs and into your blood stream. Additionally, acrylic has no soul. For me it is a dead medium.



It is the solvent used in oil painting that presents the difficulties for many. The substitutes (i.e., turpenoid, odorless, etc., etc.) on the market are decidedly inferior to refined turpentine. The viable solution is painter's mayonnaise: 1 part egg yolk, 1 part white vinegar, 3 to 5 parts linseed, walnut or poppy oil. Mix and shake it well and store in the refrigerator for no more than five days. The egg yolk lends a lustre to oil paint. I often add a drop or two of egg yolk to my medium in the late stages of a painting.

Calcium carbonate and/or marble dust is an excellent extender that also stabilizes the paint surface and dramatically hastens the drying time. If you paint with lead white, as I do, the paint sets up within a few hours. If you paint with student grade paints forego using calcium carbonate. Student grade paints are mostly chalk and a squirt of dye. That's why they're cheap.

An important benefit to calcium carbonate is that there will be times when you want a stiffer paint to build up the surface of your painting—that's the abstract structural surface.

And it's inexpensive.



The beginning of a painting, to a large extent, impacts whether or not the work will be successful.

If your wont is a refined preliminary drawing you will very likely take an illustrative approach. Like Gérôme. Yes, your painting will, also very likely, be 'correct' technically but what of the spirit?

Painting depends upon a triffecta of craft, spirit and construct. I'll talk about the construct in *Julia's Requiem*.

Beware of becoming an accomplished technician. Don't be a slave to technique. It is a means to an end.

On the other hand, without a solid foundation of technique you will lack the means to convey your narrative and engage an audience.

There's no easy answer here. In my experience it is very difficult to transition from technician to artist.

Painting is basically a harmoniously compilation of colored shapes. The head is a shape best thought of as an old-fashioned toaster. It is rectilinear. Forget about the idea of the head, the frontal aspect in particular, of being an oval. That is bad information presented by poor instructors.

Learn to draw with the brush. If you can draw with a pencil it is not a large leap to the brush. What is the large leap is the energy and direct connection to the canvas; an immediate engagement with your subject.

You cannot fake spirit in a painting. Paintings appeal to both the conscious and unconscious mind. The conscious mind can be whelmed with clever technique; the unconscious mind cannot—it will always see past pretense.



This captioned video explains how to **strike the arabesque and establish the facial matrix**. It's taken from my Corot Zoom class which includes 2K video of the course.

The ébauche is the initial 'dead' coloring in. First, the Notan is established with blocking-in the primary dark pattern—your initial strategy should always be general-to-specific; forego any details, they will only serve to trip you up.

In my Zoom class we begin with a restrictive palette of four colors: white, yellow ochre, a sanguine red (Venetian, Indian, French burnt sienna) and vine or ivory black.

Utilizing this restricted palette enables the student to better grasp and master mixing flesh tones. This restricted palette proffers both white (tint) and black (shade) and the three primary colors. Yellow Ochre : yellow | Sanguine Red : red | Black : blue.

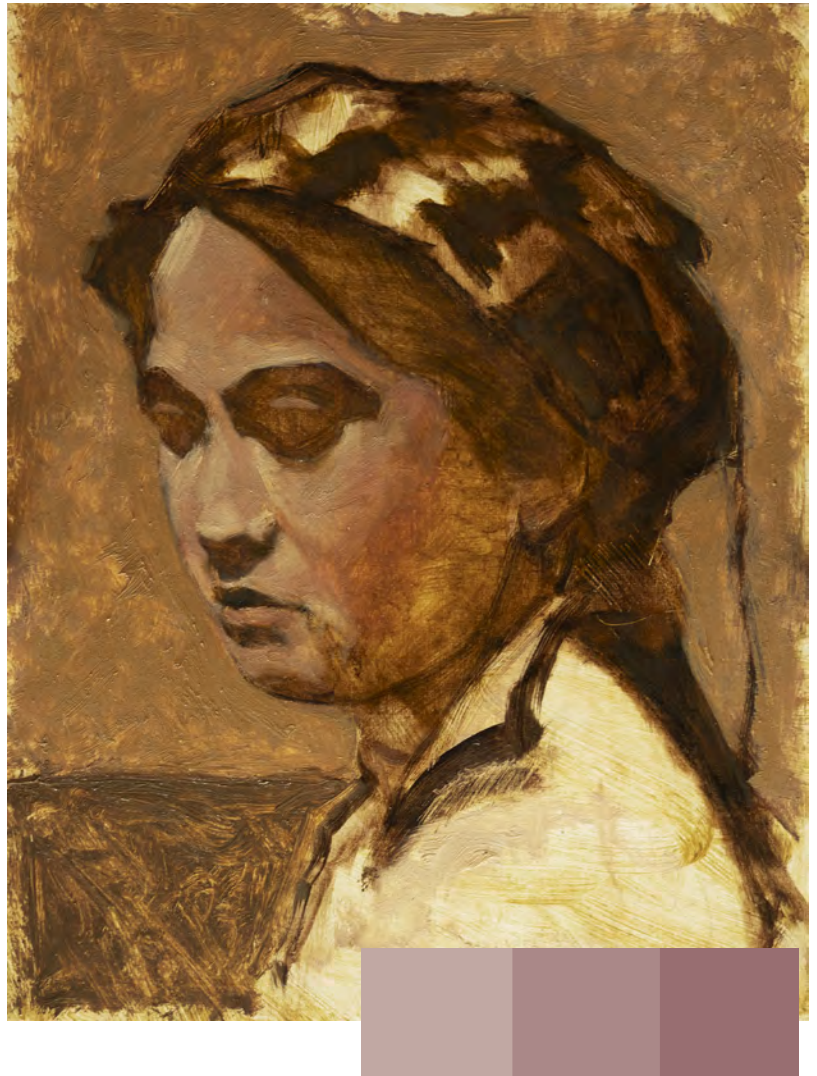
A limited range of three half-tones are mixed. A light; a middle light; a dark, warm light. The ébauche should be rendered slightly darker and warmer than what the final intent will be.

My general practice is to work the half-tones from light to dark from the hairline downwards (window-shading) always bearing in mind the big form modeling—to wit, let's have no chins twinkling in the twilight.

Like Corot I apply my half-tones through the eyes of a sculptor using a fairly large brush (filbert or round) as if it were a sculptor's trowel with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical form.

Egregious drawing errors—and there will always be drawing issues—are corrected with a wood stylus wherein I scratch and scribble in pinpricks and notations that serve as signposts for later. Often it is the interstice of the mouth that gives me grief.

And thus begins the journey to a three-dimensional portrait boasting a solid, sculptural foundation.





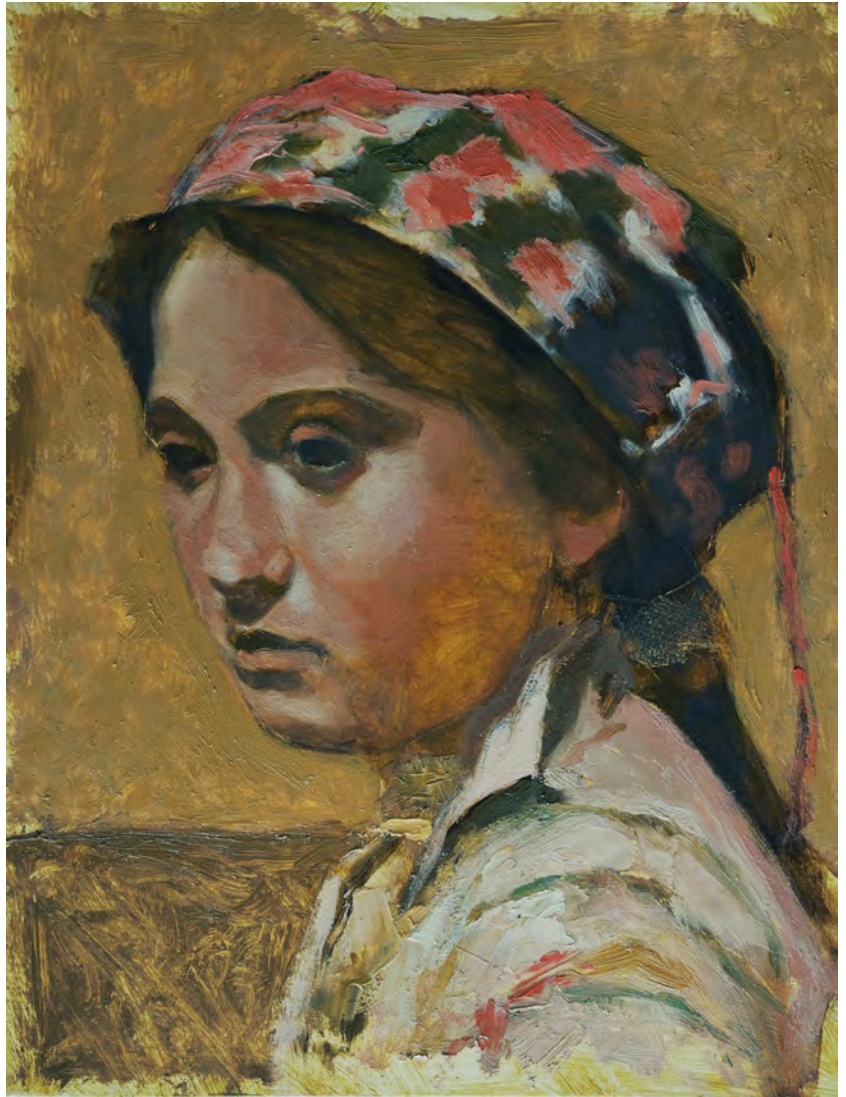
The next passage is the Pentimento (derived from the Italian *pentirsi*) which means to repent.

Drawing errors are corrected and the forms further developed, again with a sculptural sensibility.

The tonal/temperature stretch from light to dark and cool to warm is exemplified. The lights are applied thicker and the darks thinner as they transition toward the dark facial planes.

Don't feel compelled to paint everything. It is often more elegant to allow the imprimatura (the initial toning of the canvas) to serve the reflected lights, particularly in the jowl.

It is in this passage that a full palette of nine colors is employed.



A range of five values are mixed for the Pentimento. From a light base of white + yellow ochre + terre verte + black the tones are degraded utilizing the complementaries of burnt sienna + terre verte taking full value steps. Neither too similar nor too large a leap.

These will serve as my base tones. I make adjustments—half-steps / cool/warm—as necessary.



The **finire** is the show. The main event!

The drawing should be fully resolved at this point. If a soul-crushing problem should emerge at this juncture I will scrape down the entire head with my palette knife. The entire painting if need be. I am merciless. Albeit it is with some regret, perhaps a tear or two, that I will 'kill my darlings'—those charming touches that endear and delight. Creative destruction.

Terminology implies intent. Incorporate painting's terminology into your vocabulary and you'll find yourself painting at a higher level.

For example, don't—ever!—think of each stage as applying another coat of paint. You're not painting a house. Instead think of each stage as a **passage**. A constructive/destructive evolution of form.

The same goes for blending. Blending destroys form. **Knitting** your planar edges is constructive.

Using my brush, brush handle, palette knife, fingers and a wood stylus I strive for the full stretch of light/dark, warm/cool, thick/thin to render the plastic forms. And always thinking and seeing like a sculptor; always with a sympathetic concordance to the underlying anatomical forms.

It is in the finire that your voice and spirit will fully manifest. Assuming, of course, that your foundation is sound.





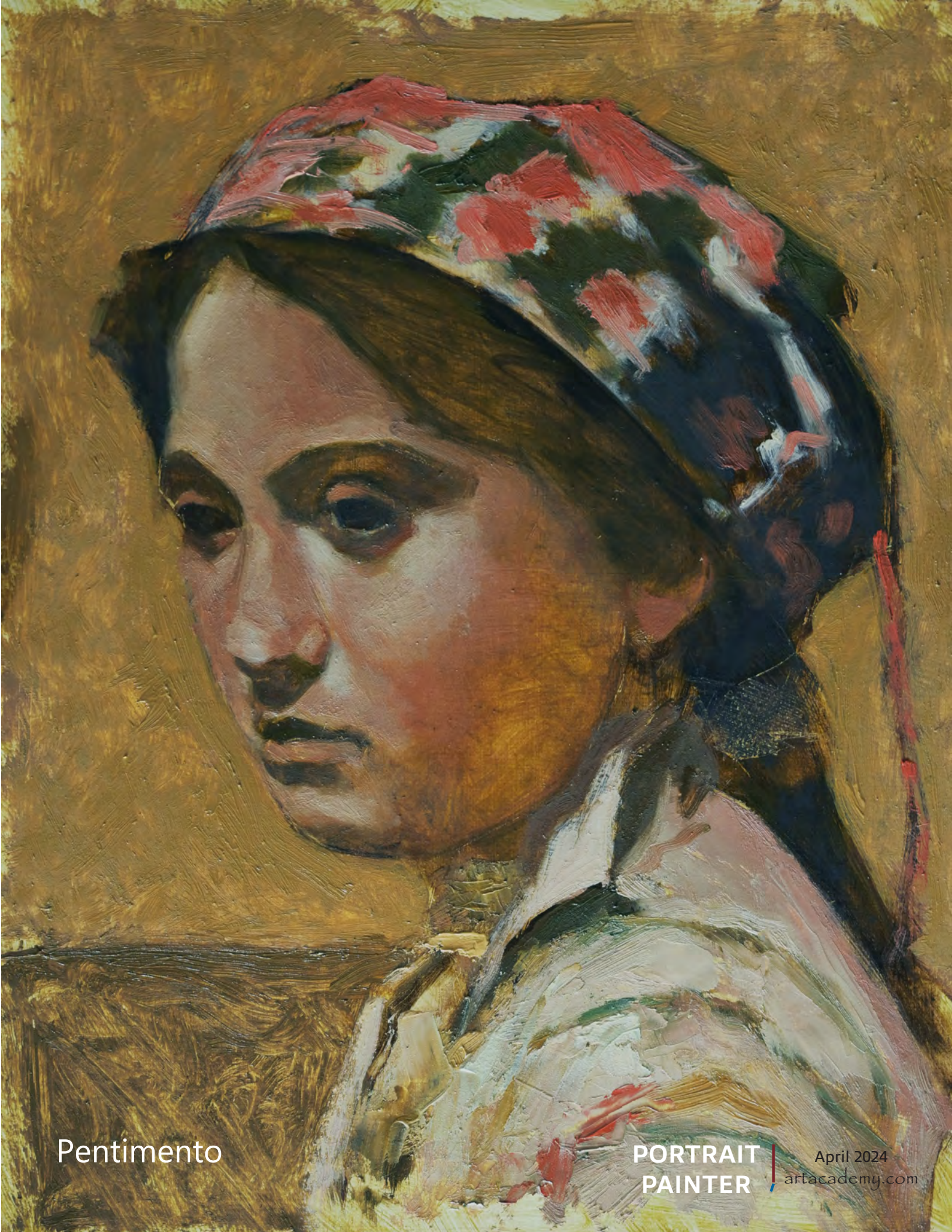


Ébauche

PORTRAIT  
PAINTER

April 2024  
[artacademy.com](https://artacademy.com)





Pentimento

PORTRAIT  
PAINTER

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Finire

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# Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot: The Greek Girl (Emma Dobigny)

## Supply List

### The Ebauche—Serving it up in the abstract

An 11 x 14" or 12 x 16", or close to, canvas or panel toned with a light imprimatura of yellow ochre and a very small amount of vine or ivory black as illustrated below.

The imprimatura activates the surface of the canvas. It can either be stroked on vertically or in an abstract expressionist manner. Use a very light medium of 1 part oil : 5 parts solvent.

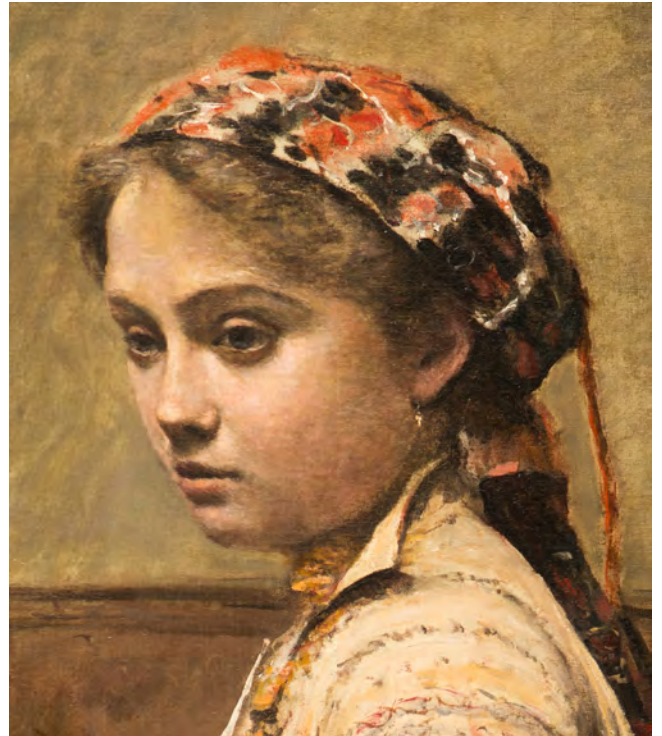
Oils: Titanium/zinc white, yellow ochre, Indian (or Venetian red), vine or ivory black.

Calcium carbonate (available in most art stores)

Medium: 1 part linseed oil/4 parts solvent

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

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



### Pentimento and Finire

Our palette is expanded to: titanium/zinc white, a pale yellow (i.e., titanium nickel yellow or lead tin yellow or lemon yellow, yellow ochre (pale is good, too), vermilion (or cadmium red medium), burnt sienna, indian red, terre verte (green earth), raw umber and vine or ivory black. . Elective: Add a small amount of Stand Oil to your medium for the Finire (Session 4).

Reference: I recommend that the reference image be printed out on a high quality photo paper to the size of your canvas, but not larger than 12x16".

Download the reference image: [artacademy.com/tv/600.png](http://artacademy.com/tv/600.png)

