Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold'

William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming, 1919

Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez

Velázquez, Self-Portrait, c. 1640

October 1918: Six hundred years of squabbling family rule came to a sudden, ignoble end. The once great, once dominant Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and disappeared. With nary a peep nor a blink of a gimlet eye, the Habsburgs bid adieau. They exited stage-right, world history stumbled and then staggered like a mugged drunkard toward the sorry state of affairs we all endure now.

The Habsburgs' annelida grip knew little bounds. They leeched and bled white the Americas with guns, steel and smallpox and settled their familial disputes with constant internecine wars and military campaigns.

The Spanish Empire was a corporate division of the Habsburgs. The Google to its parent, Alphabet Inc.

Empires, like people, are never satisfied for long. The more you make, the more you spend, the more you need. That is the nature of money.

It goes without saying in certain social circles that money be kept in the family—*ut in familia*. The Habsburgs thought it a brilliant idea to concentrate their obscene riches by marrying and procreating with one another. Gouty uncles and prepubescent nieces, reluctant brides dragged, howling protests like incensed cats, onto bridal beds. Happy uncle, happy wallet.

The Habsburgs, the ruling German-Austrian dynasty stretched from Portugal to Transylvania and across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the Philippines. The Habsburg jaw, a protuding lower jaw (mandibular prognathism) and bulbuous lower lips, grew more pronounced with each succeeding inbred generation, culminating in Charles II, the hexed one, who could not close his mouth, amongst a litany of health and mental issues.

Left: Philip IV by Velázquez
Right: Charles II by Juan Carreño de Miranda

Generation upon generation of untoward familial conjoining manifested in both physical and intellectual decadence culminating in Charles II, the idiot king, a quasimodo, who ascended the Spanish throne at the tender age of three. The few remaining strands of empire soon raveled (A side note: **ravel** means the same as **unravel**).

Let's step back from this tawdry tableau less I digress further and lead us all to tip-toe through the tulips and irrevocably down the garden path.

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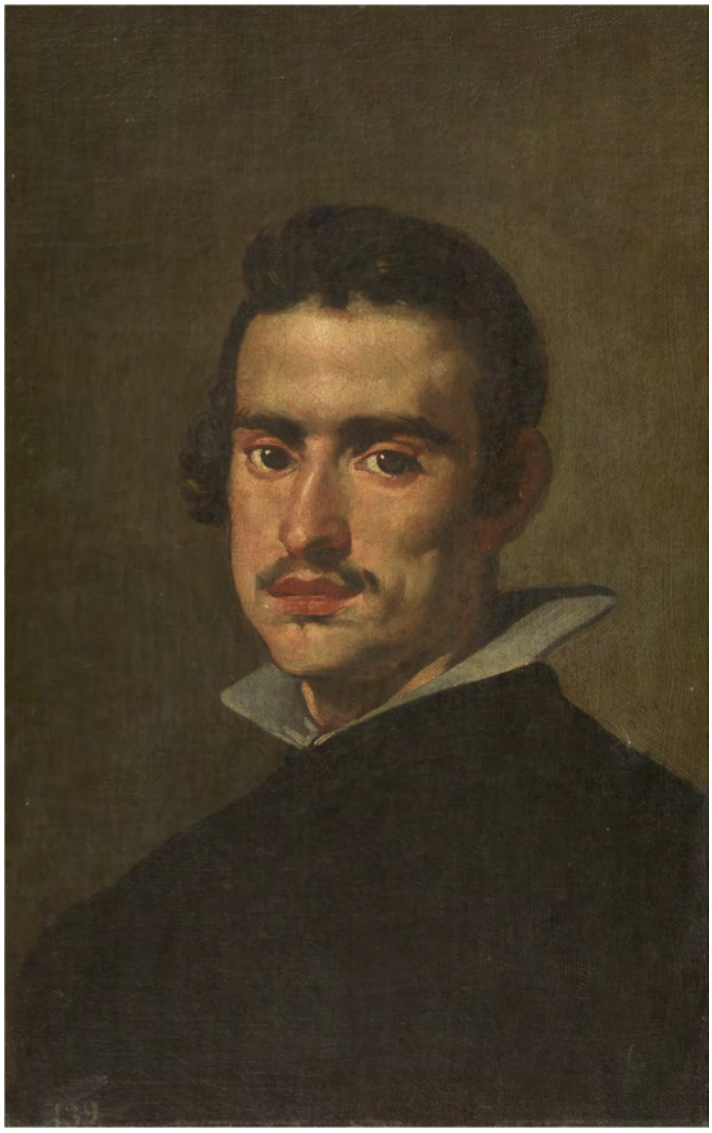
Come the early 1600's the Spanish economy was in a shambles. It was hollowed out—too much Aztec and Inca gold chasing too few goods to spend it on—and inflation soaring at times to over 1500%.

Velázquez' training began early. He didn't learn much from his first teacher, the volatile Francisco de Herrera, other than to duck a fist and slip a whipping with a rod. That horror show ended when, at age eleven, he was accepted into the studio of Francisco Pacheco, the most celebrated artist/teacher in Seville. Pacheco, an undistinguished painter, was possessed with a wealth of theory and practical solutions to painting problems.



Velázquez, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1622

After six years of study in the 'gilded cage of art' Velázquez was certified as a master painter of images in oil.

You are not supposed to say this ... well, it never stopped me before ... but from the evidence I will venture to say that Velázquez was not preternaturally gifted. *The Portrait of a Man*, c. 1622, painted when Velázquez was twenty-three exhibits many of the issues that bedevil beginner and intermediate painters. The portrait is feature centric. Too much emphasis is placed on those over-sized, awkward eyes and, horror upon horror!—Geez! Really, Diego?—the mouth has slipped the facial angle. A common rookie error after twelve years of study.

I say this not to diminish Velázquez but to point out that his fundamental skills were acquired through work and perserverance. Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses. A good teacher will buttress your weaknesses and preserve your strengths. Alas, too many academies today are sausage factories; cranking out suberb technicians while murdering the artists within.

Come 1623 Velázquez hit the painter's jackpot! Philip IV, a mere eighteen years old, almost six years Velázquez' junior, took a liking to Velázquez and appointed him the official portraitist and chamber painter of the Royal Court.

Admittedly, Pacheco pulled a few strings beseeching Count-Duke of Olivares, the puppet master of the Spanish Empire to smooth the way for the young Velázquez.

It was a stupendous gig that not only paid a respectable salary—albeit the same as the Royal barber, alas, painters were considered no better than brutish tradesmen like blacksmiths—and a pension. Plus a slave to attend to life's prosaic and soul-crushing errands. Imagine that! Every painter should have a slave. Velázquez chose to keep the slave he had inherited, Juan de Pareja, a Moor who also painted and whom Velázquez graciously tutored.

Peter Paul Rubens after Titian, 'Portrait of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor,' 1603

Yet, frankly, Velázquez was still a provincial minded painter.

A wondrous alchemy manifested in 1628 when the most famous artist in Europe, Peter Paul Rubens, came on a prolonged visit, ostensibly on a trade mission for the Flemish Court, but also to study and copy Spain's magnificent collection of Titians.

A bromance ensued. Rubens opened Velázquez' eyes to the manifold possibilities of painting—kind of like getting music lessons from John Lennon. Rubens impressed upon Velázquez the need to go to Italy and immerse himself in the triumphs of Italian painting. More strings were pulled and Velázquez merrily ensconsced himself in a Spanish galleon, his Italian venture fully funded by Philip IV. I doubt that Velázquez suffered in the sweltering, tuberculic version of 17th Century economy class lugging a greasy backpack stuffed with moldy laundry and a granola bar.

Michelangelo Merisis de Caravaggio (1571-1610) had an outsized influence on Velázquez. Left side: Velázquez, The Triumph of Bacchus (The Drunkards), 1628-29. Right side: Caravaggio, Bacchus, 1596

For almost eighteen months epiphany upon epiphany showered Velázquez like a passel of colicky pigeons. He assiduously copied Tinteretto in Venice, Raphael and Michelangelo in Rome. And Caravaggio, the rapscallion, the murderer, the procurer of rent-a-boys, thief and one of the greatest of painters had a heavy influence on Velázquez.

Much to Velázquez dismay he was eventually summoned back to dreary, Inquisition shackled Madrid, albeit a very much changed man. The genius of Velázquez awakened.

Nigh twenty years later Velázquez embarked on a second trip to Italy; a shoppin spree for Philip IV to acquire paintings and sculptures for the Spanish Palace. A painter, now at the majestics heights of painting, he had scored the commission for Innocent X's Jubilee portrait.

Left: Velázquez, Juan de Parejo, 1650
Right: Velazquez, Innocent X, 1650

Popes then were not the amiable fellows that lounge redolent upon the fisherman's perch today. Innocent X was a shrewd politician and woe to whomever got in his imperial way. His involvement in the English Civil War remains felt in the everlasting tribulations of the besotten, rat-arsed [Kudos to J.P. Dunleavy, 'The Ginger Man' 1955, for that memorable description.] emerald iles.

Few foreigners have ever been granted the honor of painting the Pope. That fact was not going to stymie Velázquez.. He refused to not toady up to this rather frightful and malevolent old man.

On this second trip Velázquez was accompanied by his erstwhile slave Juan de Pareja. Amongst Juan's mundane duties—securing tour tickets, restaurant reservations and the occasional mistress (he sired an illegitimate son, Antonio, whilst in Rome—Diego, not Juan!)—was to pose for a rehearsal painting. Yes, even a great painter like Velázquez felt it wise to rehearse and sharpen his skills!

Velázquez painted Innocent X as he saw him: a suspicious and venomous potentate. His fingers drumming an inpatient pitch.

Surprisingly, Diego wasn't excommunicated and bundled back to Spain in chains to eternal damnation and a hostile panel of Inquisitors post-haste at the unveiling. Innocent X initially declared the portrait *troppo vero*, too true. But he eventually grew fond of it and found it useful to hang in the papal visitor's waiting room. The better to intimidate pesky petitioners.

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Velazquez, Portrait of Philip IV, 1652-3

Royal portraits are often dull affairs. That was the law, no monkeying about with smiles and tell-tale gestures.

Philip IV was a lonely guy who ascended the Spanish throne at sixteen and was immediately ensnared by the Rasputinesque Count-Duke of Olivares, a puppet master extraordinaire, twenty years Philip IV's senior, whose minions scoured the sun desicatted plateau in search of randy milkmaids, desperate to escape their rural confines and the withering gaze of priests and uncles, to entertain the lonesome adolescent king.

Well, need I say more? Of course I do.

Philip IV was as charming as cold, rancid fish for breakfast. He quickly grew bored with his libidinal toys and banished them to the gloomy ossuaries of remote nunneries. There would be no manic songbursts atop dewy alps for these cast-aside lasses.

Painters were not held in high esteem by the Spanish nobility. Painters were considered, tolerated at best, as persnicketity tradesmen, only a notch or two above carpenters. But that probably depended on whether or not you needed a new armoire to house your sartorial splendors.

Imagine the chittering of the palace courtiers when Philip IV would saunter into Velázquez' studio for an afternoon of chit chat. He even had his own kingly chair. I doubt very much that that chair was like the wobbly, paint splattered contraption upon which my studio guests perch.

These chit chats were akin to the President of the United States sauntering into the kitchen scarfing a Snickers bar to watch, critique and chat with the plumber whilst the world, as always, was going to hell.

Let me tell you ... it's pretty hard to really become engaged in a painting while entertaining a voluble and melancholic guest.

Juan de Pareja, Self-Portrait, 1661

And when your guest is the boss bad things have a way of presenting themselves: One horribly fateful day such a bad thing did happen. I guess Veláquez was working on some background passages and Philip IV, bored out of his nut, was idly poking about when he espied a canvas turned to the wall.

'Golly, I haven't seen this one before,' he may have thought and, like a Netflix preview, turned it around to take a gander.

Alas, for Velázquez, it was a head study painted by Juan de Pareja. Philip IV was so struck by Juan's painting that he demanded Juan be freed. Immediately!

'Que!?' Velázquez may or may not have uttered.

'Damn it all! First he drinks all of my finest wine and then he frees my slave!!'

And thus Velázquez was remanded to washing out his own brushes uttering many an ungentlemanly Spanish oath.

Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. An incredibly complex work of shifting planes and focal points that somehow all come together in a unified whole. Great art defies analysis. The meninas are the Infanta (bequethed to Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor) Margarita's maids of honor. Margarita died at 22 years. Consanguinity.

Men of Pleasure

Hombres de placer, men of pleasure, lent a carnivalesque otherworldliness, a crucial counterpoint, to the rigidly codified social structure of the Royal Court.

These 'others' provided both entertainment and a stern warning of God's providance. This was, afterall, the prickly realm of the Spanish Inquisition.

Velázquez' informal portrayals allowed him unfettered reign to paint as he chose to paint. The genius of Velázquez manifested in the 'other'.

Composition was a strategic tool for Velázquez in motivating the viewer to experience his work as it was intended. Diagonal structures, complex focal points, and separate planes manipulate the viewer's eye to spur a deeper understanding of the picture.

Velázques, *The Buffoon Calabacillas*, 1635-39

The portraits were intentionally painted out of focus to express life and movement and to blur the boundaries of temporal flesh.

Velázquez' use of extra-long handled round brushes facilitated this effect. When I begin a painting, striking the initial shapes and gestures, I use a #24 Escoda Chungking extra-long (60cm) handled filbert (4535). Unfortunately they don't make rounds. Expect to pony up $100 per brush.

employed pigment, the yellow ochre/lead tin yellow tinted lights buttressed with chalk and quartz, as if they were clay.

And as was Velázquez unfortunate wont the mouth, again!, misplaced.

No argument here as to whether the papal collar was reconsidered. What is curious, however, is that it appears that stack white was used for the redrawing of it.

Stack white is made from lead rods suspended over horse manure and allowed to curdle into white flakes. It would have been Juan de Pareja's job to attend to the gathering of the white flakes. There are marks that you can make with stack white, which, rhealogically, has an exceptionally long tail, that cannot be achieved with lesser pigments. Good paints, like good ponies, have long tails.

The Boy from Vallecas, Francisco Lezcano, 1638

Francisco is holding a pack of cards, inviting any rube who might dare to be cheated of a few coins. He is informal and relaxed, possessed of an attitude that would be unthinkable in a portrait of any other sort of person. His casualness belies a cheeky fellow.

He was born afflicted with a thryoid deficiency (cretinism with oligophrenia) that significantly impacted both his physical and intellectual capabilities which, given the less-than-enlightened timbre of the times, the palace found amusing. But better than the alternative of being abandoned in a midden.

Velázquez' treatment of Lezcano's head and hands are breathtaking in the seemingly casual rendering of facial forms, executed with an economy of means achieved by very few painters. Every brush stroke is rendered with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical forms.

The gaze and undercarriage of the nose are articulated minimally, yet convincingly. And, here, Diego has nailed the mouth firmly to the cross: an intriguingly mocking invitation to try your hands at cards.

I, for one, would decline for fear of losing my lunch money.

A subtle expression is the devil to paint; an hesitant and excessive description will transform a friendly laugh into the hideous guffaw of a sociopathic felon.

John Singer Sargent, who was highly influenced by Velázquez, stressed to his students that in order to fully understand the modelling of the head is to paint it omitting the facial features. Every student is feature centric. So, too, was Velázquez. Refer back to his early *Portrait of a Man*, 1622.

Like Velázquez, look deep past the facial features and into the underlying planes and structures that comprise a head. Therein lies truth and the likeness in all of its manifestations.

Beginning Lezcano—the ébauche

The beginning of a painting often determines whether it will be a success or not. On the one hand the drawing must be reasonably accurate, at least within 90%, and on the other you mustn't be so concerned with the drawing that it inhibits the spirit. Technique should be the liberator of compelling expression, not a shackle that suffocates and procures timid and tentative work.

The first, and most important, task is to strike the large shape, the arabesque, of the head. This is where both the likeness and expression reside. Accurately establishing the arabesque—how high, how wide and the angles—is an acquired skill. Once you have acquired that skill door-upon-door is flung open allowing entry into the more wondrous modes of painting expression.

First things first: Learn to draw with the brush and forego the preliminary drawing (the cartoon). Unless you are beginning a compositionally complex work which dictates unforgivingly precise placements, using a preliminary drawing often leads to a coloring-in process of painting which in the end results in a skillful illustration but lacks an armature to give it substance.

Paintings are felt more than they are seen. A compelling painting stays with the viewer, an illustrative work is a tourist on a day trip.

Striking shape is an acquired skill. Begin with a simplified shape and draw it to the same dimensions as the template (as shown here on the right) on a sheet of tracing paper. You can then assess your strengths and weakness by positioning your drawing over the template.

Once the arabesque is struck, only a few succinct lines are required, the blocking-in of the overall light/dark pattern is effected. Train yourself to see through the eyes of a sculptor; paint as if you were modeling in clay slapping and pushing the elements into position. If you make a mistake a rag, a finger, a stiff brush anointed with medium, will readily rectify your crime.

The common advice given to beginners is to paint and model form from dark to light. The perfidy! The perfidy! This is the blind leading the blind, inevitably stumbling into the abyss.

Begin with the half-tones. Mixing flesh tones is also an acquired skill. Learning is a step-by-step, layered approach. With a palette of four colors: white, yellow ochre, a sanguine red and black mix a rudimentary array of three half-tones: a cool light, a middle light and a warm dark light.

A general rule of thumb for the ébauche is to render the half-tones a little bit darker and warmer than what they initially appear. Even when the paint is dry it is much easier and more effective to lighten and warm a passage than it is to subsequently darken and cool it.

Should you need to later darken a passage glazing is not your savior. Not at all. You need to first scrape out the offending passage with your palette knife. Vertical scraping will also somewhat flatten the form. And that's a good thing at this early corrective stage. And then make your correction(s).

An inviting trap is to color-in the head. Yes! That infernal, damned illustrative approach that like your friendly neighborhood serial killer whispers soothing entreaties ... It's OK ... relax ... shhh ... before relegating your once promising painting to the coroner's austere laboratory of horrors.

Upon your palette you have three values, three colored batches of clay. Again, see through the eyes of a sculptor; peer past the facial features deeper into the structure of the head. Determine the planar aspects vis-a-vis the skull.

And like a sculptor plug those pieces of colored clay into their respective positions.

In painting this is the practice of spotting color value/notes. This is the practice of Velázquez; this is the practice of Sargent; this is the practice of Rembrandt. Ad nauseum.

Spotting color/value notes has a simple hierarchy of criteria: 1. Select your value; 2. Place it using both vertical and horizontal plumbing; 3. Shape it. And best to shape your notes so that they have a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying structure. That's the skull.

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PORTRAIT PAINTER

March 2024

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Pentimento

From the Italian *pentirsi* comes Pentimento meaning 'to repent'. Penance invariably demands that all of your measures be double-checked. We all have our biases: slanting things too far to the left; the facial angle that invariably drifts to the center; brow lines that creep up, etc., etc.

I use a wooden stylus to inscribe pinpricks to establish, re-establish, my landmarks. The stylus is also quite useful to scratch out the placement and shape of critical lights, such as the left-side eyelid in the first pass of the Pentimento.

It usually takes two passes of the Pentimento to build up the facial forms, working from general to specific. My color/value notes become more precise as I push and pull the paint with a sympathetic concordance to the anatomy and expression.

My palette is expanded to nine colors including lead tin yellow and vermilion. In the academic literature you will read that Velázquez used Naples Yellow. Perhaps, perhaps. But it would be an unnecessary addition to his palette as Naples Yellow is readily mixed with flake white, yellow ochre, a touch of lead tin yellow and a micro-dose of ivory or vine black.

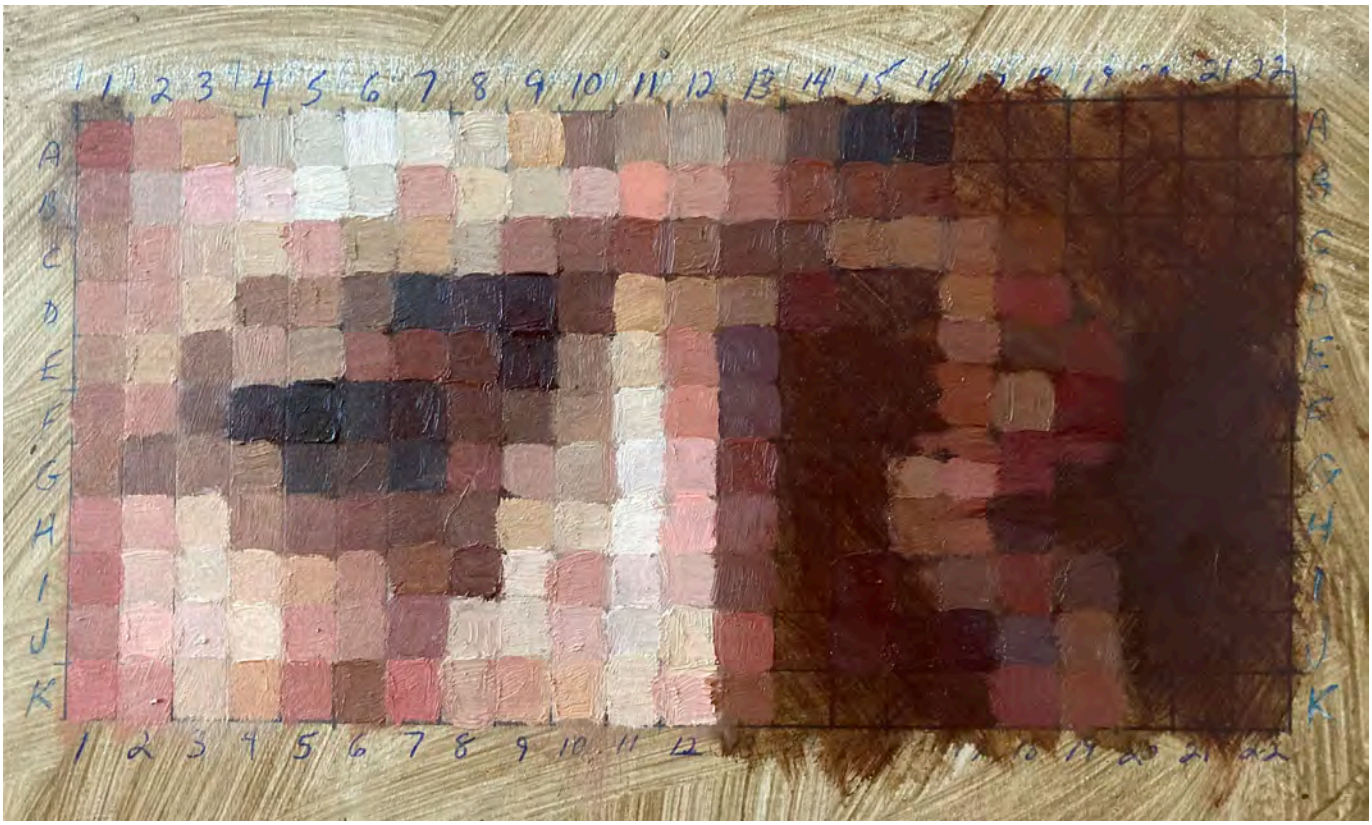
This is true for many of the colors smartly presented on the art store's rack. Most hues can be mixed from a rudimentary palette. However, there are some colors that you will need to pony up your Visa for: cerulean blue and cadmium orange come to mind. True, you can whip up an orange but it is a finicky color that quickly looks dirty. Like that orange couch in your accountant's office, perhaps.

My working palette for flesh tones is: flake white, lead tin yellow, yellow ochre, vermilion, burnt sienna, venetian red, terre verte, raw umber and vine black. On those days when I have squeezed out the last grains of terre verte while waiting for replenishments to arrive, a workable green can be rendered with yellow ochre and black.

The beginning painter is well advised to spend the necessary time learning how to mix color. Flesh tones are generally neutral tones that lean either toward the warm or cool spectrum. From a base of white/yellow ochre/lead tin yellow (or a pale yellow) and a micro-dose of black a range of flesh tones can be made from varying quantities of burnt sienna and terre verte.

As the facial forms progress from the cool lights to the middle warms vermilion does the job nicely. Cadmium red is too harsh, too garish. The dark forms invariably pick up some of the background color particularly in the reflected lights.

It is for good reason that I limit the ébauche to a palette of only four colors. First, master the possibilities of that restricted palette and step-by-step introduce more colors to your kit.



The practice of spotting color/value notes is predicated on the fundamentals of mixing color values. In this exercise developed from Rembrandt's *Old Man in a Military Costume* I distilled the color notes to a pixelated grid.

Lean back and allow your eyes to fall into soft focus and the facial form manifests.

When you step up to a Rembrandt or a Velázquez, especially *Las Meninas*, the forms dissolve into a marvelous abstraction of color and pigment. As you step back it all snaps into place.

Pentimento: First Pass


Pentimento: Second Pass

Finire

The final chapter of a painting invokes going for the full stretch of light to dark / cool to warm without tripping too far toward a garish result.

The accents and highlights are brought to full resolution. The biggest danger is, as always, becoming overly feature centric and precious.

If your foundation is solid there is little chance of your screwing it over. Sure, there will always be those times when a poor decision relegates your hard work to the pergatory of the trash can.

If your foundation is weak, well, there is a saying: 'You can't polish shit.'

But before you slip on a hair shirt and proceed to beating the bejeesus out of yourself bear in mind that even Velázquez had his dogs. Many of John Singer Sargent's paintings lack vitality. That's part of the game.

A great painting is built upon a multitude of failed paintings. For a painter it is the next one that will prove their mettle.

> It is harder to see than it is to express. The whole value of art rests in the artist's ability to see well into what is before him.
>
> Robert Henri

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MODULE 7 : Velazquez : El Nino
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 an imprimaturi of burnt sienna and a very small amount of vine or ivory black as illustrated below.

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 of 1 part oil : 5 parts solvent.

Oils: Titanium/zine 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, 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/700.png