The History/Practice of
Preparing a Realistic Painting

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Those new to painting (and Illustration as well) are unaware of the thorough preparation artists do to prepare for doing a realistic painting.

First - there are two basic kinds of artists - "Intuitive" and "Intellectual". The classic intuitive painters included Van Gogh and Grandma Moses. They were essentially self-taught and painted from their heart or "gut". Paintings were done "a la prima" (Italian for "to the first"_ painting done by attacking a blank canvas with a paint brush directly). There is nothing wrong with this approach except that:

1. Intuitive painting can't be taught - Mozart is said to have looked at a piano at age three, it made sense to him and he sat down and started to play. Most of us need piano lessons to play the piano (or specifically, in our case, art lessons to paint).

2. I teach painting from the realistic point of view, based on careful understanding of the underlying principles of art - form, perspective, color theory, etc. AND careful planning.

Van Gogh and his intuitive approach, produced 2,000 paintings and drawings in his 10 year painting career (200 a year).

An intellectual painter, Jan VerMeer did ONE or TWO PAINTINGS A YEAR ... carefully planned and prepared paintings.

Let's start by repeating the "Isn't Using a Camera Cheating" section of the Camera (Online Lesson #5) for those of you who have come to this lesson without taking Online Lesson #5 - If you have done Online Lesson #5, scroll down to the rest of this Online Lesson.

Isn't using a camera cheating?

Leonardo DaVinci didn't have a camera, so he took TWO easels and a large sheet of glass and placed the glass saddling the two easels and he TRACED the landscape to better understand the perspective.

Jan VerMeer used a "Camera Obscura" (click on the words Camera Obscura to see more about it). VerMeer may have TRACED the image produced as part of his painting process OR painted his painting DIRECTLY on his panels IN THE CAMERA OBSCURA. The odd (and perfect) perspectives and the strange and characteristic

highlight or "light pings" in his paintings are characteristic of the Camera Obscura. There also is substantial evidence that Vermeer may have used another optical device: the "Camera Lucida". See the books listed below and buy them or get them from your library to follow up this fascinating story about how these great painters used cameras and pre-camera used other optical and mechanical means to build great pictures.

The camera arrived just in time for [Edgar Degas](). He became an expert photographer and the camera influenced his vision in his paintings. Prior to Degas, the figures in paintings were essentially totally contained inside the picture rectangle – Degas CUT OFF the figure in imitation of the camera. Look at his work

A book on the use of the camera or camera obscura at Amazon.com:
[Vermeer's Camera : Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces by Philip Steadman]()

For more on all then uses of the camera and other aids to painting; also at Amazon.com is: [Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters by David Hockney]()

Many illustrators, like Norman Rockwell, take photos of their subjects and then project the images photographically onto their canvas or board and then TRACE the projected images in preparation to start painting.

Others, actually have photographic prints of their reference materials (models, still lifes, landscapes) PRINTED onto their working surface (canvas or board) and then paint on top of the photograph. According to the research by David Hockney referred to above, variants of this practice date to the 1520's.

Below, is my 10 portrait commissioned painting "Le Pescadou" (a restaurant in Manhattan, NYC, NY, USA. I use it as a case study of preparation for a realistic painting. I combined the use of the following reference materials and preparatory studies to do this painting.

- Photos of the portrait people
- Photos of the restaurant
- Preparatory pencil and oil sketches
- 3d computer rendered lighting studies
- Repeated revisits to the restaurant to sketch, photograph and study

(The 3 above)

To see close-ups of the portraits of the three people in the foreground, click on them.

My oil painting "Le Pescadou" includes ten portraits of friends in the place where many of their youthful hours were happily spent. They say "you can't go back". In F Scott Fitzgerald's short story "Babylon Revisited", the protagonist tries to find the "civilization" he had left behind in Paris some 10 years prior - but as the title suggests, you can't go back to a civilization that has disappeared. In the wonderful story behind this commissioned oil painting, my patron, Cliff Lanier, was facing the breaking up of his old crowd that had watered together at Le Pescadou, an excellent French restaurant and bar on Sixth Avenue and King Street in historic Greenwich Village, Manhattan . . . his circle of single friends were starting to get married and move away. Cliff wanted to capture that time - their civilization that was about disappear from Pescadou . . . the youthful days and nights that centered around King Street and "Le Pesc".

Cliff had seen an exhibit of my oil paintings, mostly of bars and coffee houses in Manhattan and asked if I would paint his crew in situ in Le Pescadou and to do so as a surprise. This meant the other portrait subjects could not be informed of the painting and therefore would not be available to sit for portraits nor be photographed at Le Pescadou. I accepted what became a monumental challenge - balancing a good painting with portraiture (nine of them) and secrecy.

My first job was to photograph and sketch the restaurant, choosing a time of day and lighting that would make a good painting.

I made dozens hundreds or photos and oil and pencil with watercolor sketches some of which are shown.

Oil sketch - one of many

Pencil and watercolor sketch

Cliff's job was to "borrow" photos for my use in creating likenesses from everyone's home.

Not having all the people in the same lighting situation since the reference photos were snapshots shot in different lighting situations in several countries . . . I made a three-dimensional solid modeled computer simulation of Le Pescadou with the lighting I planned to use.

To be sure, making 3d computer models may be too much to ask of the average person learning to paint. It involves costly computers . software and lots of time training in 3d. On the other hand, there are simpler ways of achieving this kind of modeling [Grant Wood](), (1892-1942) an American "regionalist" painter, made clay models of his landscapes and people and lit them to create his lighting models and form information, Look at his "Young Corn" painting on the site his name above links to and you can see the influence on his image- the solid, consistent lighting that his clay models helped him in finding.

3d lighting computer model
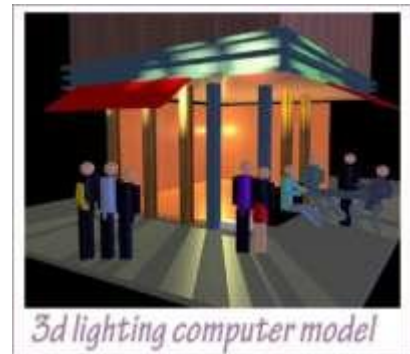
Some more on the underlying aesthetics of the painting - I recently heard Mike Nichols talking about his movie "The Graduate" and amongst the underlying aesthetic touches he used, he had Mrs. Robinson always dressed in some kind of or touch of animal print, subliminally reinforcing her character as a predator.

Some of my underlying elements:

As the 3d lighting model above shows, the structure of the painting is an explosion - Le Pescadou is exploding figuratively - Armageddon - the end of an era.

Also, while a painterly realistic oil, "Le Pescadou" is painted as a dream, an epic, a place full of life, full of fun, full of fun people, the place to be, to remember.

The stage directions for Tennessee Williams "The Glass Menagerie" is that it is a "memory" play, as if shot through gauze" - the protagonist is remembering his family as he wanders the earth as a sailor, having left them long ago. I painted "Le Pescadou" in that manner. Like "Finian's Rainbow" or "Camelot" - this "Le Pescadou" is a dream, again "shot through gauze".

The complexity, the issue of making ten likenesses, the time "Le Pescadou" took. the hours and then days of research, photography, sketching and painting remind me of James McNeil Whistler's comment that every artist needs a guy who stands behind him and hits him over the head with a mallet when the painting is done - I kept looking over my shoulder for that guy with the mallet but he never arrived. I might say the next time some one gives me a ten portrait painting commission, I would hope the guy with the mallet has a gun and shoots me. But in the end, there is the painting . . . and I did it.

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