HOW TO PAINT A PORTRAIT

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Portrait Painting Techniques from Artist Daily

Watercolor Portraiture

CAPTURE THE MODEL'S GESTURE WITH VIGOROUS STROKES AND LET IT BE THE GUIDE FOR YOUR PAINTING. HERE'S HOW.

Florida artist Janet Rogers makes the process of painting figures in watercolor seem almost effortless in that she captures the likeness and personality of her subjects without laboring over all the details. She incorporates gestured strokes of transparent color, natural blends of warm and cool pigments, and just enough detail to capture a person's individual appearance. Her floral paintings seem just as approachable with their combinations of wet-in-wet blends of bright colors, well-focused accents of white paper, and judicious use of hard edges.

Although Rogers' techniques are not so easy to master, her demonstrations make it clear she can teach almost anyone to improve their skills in watercolor paintings. She emphasizes the need to practice, to start over when things fail, and to develop strong drawing skills. She connects with students by confessing that she shares the same need to constantly remind herself about the important steps that must be taken when painting. Moreover, she debates the various options available to her and acknowledges when she may have made the wrong choice. Students watching her live or filmed demonstrations recognize that

ABOVE
Model From Buffalo
2007, watercolor, 30 x 22.
Collection the artist.

Study for
Cassandra
With Hat
2007, watercolor
20 x 14. Collection
the artist.

Young Girl
in White
2008, watercolor, 30 x 22.
Collection the artist.

although Rogers has developed advanced skills, she still understands what the rest of us are trying to learn and how much we need encouragement.

Most of Rogers' paintings start out with the creation of loose graphite drawings and progress toward to the application of transparent watercolor. The artist uses large golden taklon synthetic hair brushes on sheets of Arches watercolor paper or on Daler-Rowney's new Langton Prestige paper. She recommends that students undertake several separate kinds of exercises before actually beginning their studio paintings: drawing, sketching in watercolor from life or photographs, and using three warm–up painting exercises. Here's a detailed description of those recommended steps.

Getting Ready:

1. Try theses warm-up exercises:

• **Paint with only one color.** Develop a sketch with only one tube color and water. It will help you develop an instinctive sense of how much water is needed to achieve various degrees of transparency and opacity. This exercise should be done without drawing first. Another goal is to connect shadow shapes.

• **Paint color shapes without drawing them first.** Although drawing is important to watercolor painting, you don't want painting to become a process of filling in carefully-drawn shapes. On the contrary, you want the painted shapes to have their own beauty and harmony.

2. Make blind-contour and quick-gesture drawings to loosen up. To make a blind contour drawing, keep your eyes focused on the subject, not on the drawing. Never lift the pencil from the paper, and don't look at the drawing until it is complete. The resulting drawing may look very bizarre and completely disjointed, but you'll recognize that you learned a lot

by keeping your attention on the movement of lines across the body of the person you are drawing.

Gesture drawings are made quickly and are intended to capture the sense of weight distribution, movement, and overall proportions. They may wind up looking like a bunch of overlapping scribbles to someone else, but you'll find they will help you become more responsive to the action of the figure.

One of the best books on this subject is *The Natural Way to Draw* by Kimon Nicolaides (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston), which explains how to make both types of drawings. The classic drawing book also explains how the recommended exercises can help you loosen up and become more sensitive to subtle shifts in lines, directional movements, weight distribution, and expression.

3. Make quick watercolor sketches from life or photographs, and let them guide the development of your final painting. Watch your paper, and don't rely on copying your photo or subject. This process will help you avoid becoming too tight and concerned about small details. Do a minimum amount of drawing, and get right to the painting process. Another way of using drawing as a means, not an end in itself, is to do a minimal amount of drawing to place the subject within the rectangular space of the paper and guide your brush through the initial stages of painting. Try a few exercises in which you make the briefest graphite lines possible and then jump right into the painting process.

The Painting Process:

1. Arrange color mixtures in separate palettes with the cool combinations separated from the warm ones. You'll want to have thick puddles of pigment on the palette that are similar to those an oil painter would mix. Make sure those "pigment puddles," as I call them, don't flow together and create dull, dirty combinations. Just keep families of colors together and you won't have to worry about what pigment combinations wind up on your brush.
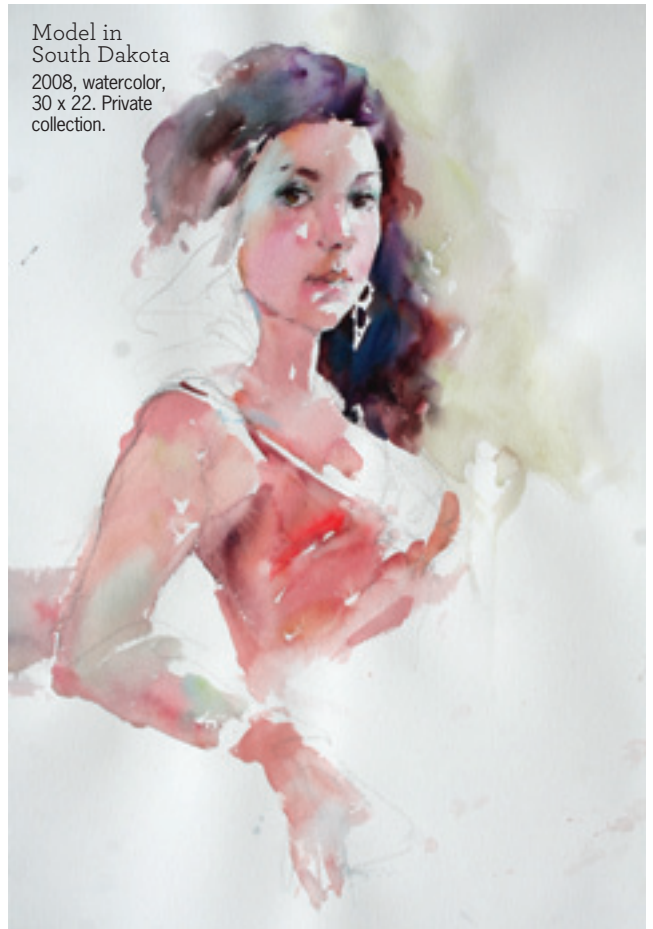
2. Starting with dry paper, load a large round or flat brush with pigment and water, and react to your subject. Always use the biggest brush you can

The Red Dress
2007, watercolor,
30 x 22. Collection
Amy McKay.

Model in
South Dakota
2008, watercolor,
30 x 22. Private
collection.

Victoria
2008, watercolor,
21 x 15. Collection
the artist.

Brittany
2007, watercolor,
30 x 22. Collection
the artist.

handle to avoid tightening up and making lots of short strokes on the paper.

3. Don't hold the paint brush as you would a pencil. Grip it so that you have to move your entire arm in order to control the flow of paint.

4. Control values with the amount of water you mix with the paint. One of the exercises (making color swatches) is designed to help you develop an instinctive sense of how much water to mix with the pigment. If you don't yet have that subconscious knowledge, test out your mixtures on the same kind of paper on which you are developing the painting. With this exercise you will also discover how not to overwhelm one color and how to discover others.

5. Clean your brushes before reloading them with completely different color combinations. You want to develop the habit of washing out your brush and drying it with a paper towel after you finish painting an area. That habit will help you avoid making the mistake of picking up an unwanted color or a mixture that is much too intense.

6. Try to get the values close to your final version right away instead of building up layers. You can always return to darken your shapes further after they dry.

7. Keep the painting simple. Don't try to say too much. You don't have to explain everything about the subject to viewers. Let them use their imagination.

8. Close one eye when you look at the painting so that you only see the general shapes, not the details, and don't forget to squint to see the values more easily.

9. Test background colors on the painting and not on separate sheets. Colors and values have a *relative* influence on a painting, and the only way to gauge whether or not you have the right mixture is to put it down on the painting. You can always adjust while the paper is wet by lifting paint off or adding different pigments.

10. Look for the personal connections you have with the image—something that grabs you—such as the glance in a person's eyes;

**Cassandra With
an Attitude**
2005, watercolor,
30 x 22. Collection
the artist.

the movement of hair, arms, or legs; or the pattern of colors in clothing.

11. Let the medium of watercolor connect with the subject in an expressive way. That is, use wet-in-wet, dry brush, thrown, or tight applications of paint where they are most indicative of the way you feel about the subject.

12. Let the color flow onto the paper, changing the pigment combinations until you recognize the effect you want. That is, start with one dominant color, and then immediately load other colors on your brush or drop them into the wet areas of the paper. The variety will help create a sense of dimension, changing light, and richness that will enhance the painting.

13. Don't be afraid to throw the paint onto the paper to make other random, quick gestures.

14. Avoid painting into wet areas because that might turn the color muddy.

15. Work intuitively and respond to what is happening rather than

Lady in White—Profile
2004, watercolor,
27 x 22. Collection
Gregory Valentine.

just executing a preplanned process.

16. Look for special shapes and unusual colors that appear.

Remember, a painting has a life of its own and isn't just a rendering of what appears in the photograph or the live model. The shapes you paint should be beautiful, integrated, and varied.

17. As you work, make sure to connect the painted shapes

to one another as well as to the white shapes of unpainted paper. This is one of those "rules" of good composition because it is a way of directing the viewer's attention from one part of a painting to another.

18. Resolve problems immediately by looking for natural paths, but don't lose your sense of the entire painting.

This is a tough balancing act for every

painter. You want to resolve problems, but you don't want to overwork an area.

19. Finish your paintings by marking the darkest darks—the

corners of the mouth, the nostrils, the eye lids, the shadow under the chin, etc.

20. Make painting an exciting, spontaneous, fun adventure,

and you'll never be disappointed with the results. ■

United States
Attorney General
John D. Ashcroft
2005, oil, 52 x 40.
Collection Department of
Justice, Washington, DC.

Oil Painting Lessons on
How to Paint a Portrait

15 PORTRAIT PAINTING TECHNIQUES FROM ARTIST DAILY

HOW TO PAINT A PORTRAIT

In 1979, when **John Howard Sanden** and Elizabeth R. Sanden began to write their first book, *Painting the Head in Oil* (Watson-Guptill Publications, New York, New York), their editor urged them to describe the painting process in 29 steps. "Don Holden told us to break the process down into 29 stages of development," Sanden remembers. "I don't know how he came up with that number, but we've used it as a guide in subsequent books, videos, and DVDs. I guess it worked for me because I find that students gain a better understanding of portrait painting if I explain the process in specific, sequential steps they can remember and repeat."

Thousands of artists have obviously agreed with the Sandens and their editor because that first book and three additional books—*Successful Portrait Painting* (Watson-Guptill Publications, New York, New York), *Portraits From Life in 29 Steps* (North Light Books, Cincinnati, Ohio), and *The Portraits of John Howard Sanden: A Thirtieth Anniversary Collection* (Madison Square Press, New York, New York)—successfully launched the careers of generations of painters who read the advice about setting up a professional studio, planning a commission, gathering reference material, posing and lighting a subject, and painting an accurate and satisfying portrait. So too did the artists who purchased Sanden's filmed program as well as the line of Pro Mix Color System oil paints he formulated with the Martin/F. Weber company. The latter two books are available through The Portrait Institute's website (www.portraitinstitute.com). A fifth Sanden book, *Face to Face With Greatness: The Adventure of Portrait Painting* was published in 2007.

But with all due respect to Holden, the value of Sanden's instruction is

Mother Angelica
2004, oil, 58 x 42. Collection Eternal World Television Network, Birmingham, Alabama.

not in the number of stages but in the way he systematically guides artists through the entire painting process. He recommends ways of placing an accurate drawing of a subject's head on a canvas, whether the artist works from life or photographs, and then he presents a logical method of using specific mixtures of flesh colors, starting with shadows and proceeding to the halftones in transitional, lower, middle, upper, and central areas of the face. The light values are then developed in the same sequence, with reflected light and details added after restating previously painted sections. "I believe you will find that this logical procedure will give you the discipline and focus that the difficult art of portraiture demands," Sanden wrote in *Portraits From Life in*

Untitled
2006, oil, 66 x 46. Private collection.

29 Steps. "There is plenty of room for intuition and creativity. Following a definite procedure builds assurance and competence."

To help explain this logical procedure, Sanden recently painted a portrait of his daughter, Pamela McMahon, filmed the process for his *Painting the Head in One Sitting III: Pam* DVD (also available through The Portrait Institute's website [www.portraitin-stitute.com]), and photographed it at the end of each stage of the painting's development for this article. As always,

he worked with the same dependable palette of tube colors and a range of neutral, dark, halftone, and light color mixtures (see sidebar).

Sanden began by establishing the size and placement of the figure's head on a stretched canvas, and then he drew the elements of the woman's face with a size 4 bristle brush and some of his neutral mixture. Once he was confident about his drawing, **he massed**

in the warm shadows in the hair, along the side of the face, and in the neck area. Then, following the procedures recommended in his books and videos, **Sanden painted the halftones in the lower third of the face, pulled a lighter mixture across the woman's cheekbone, and used an even lighter mixture to block in her forehead. Throughout this preliminary stage he worked on large shapes rather than details so he could concentrate on the relative value and color temperature appropriate for each area of the face.**

Before restating any of these painted areas, the artist massed in a warm background color so he could better judge the manner in which he would develop the woman's hair and facial features. He also blocked in a cool blue color to suggest a blouse, keeping the paint relatively thin so he could create a smooth, soft transition between the hair and the clothing.

"Now we begin the serious work of restating everything we've recorded," Sanden wrote in *Portraits From Life in 29 Steps*; at this stage in the development of the portrait of his daughter he followed his own good advice. "**I went over all the dark areas in the painting, large and small, making careful new judgments since other tones were now in place. … Restating the halftones is the longest and most difficult step. It's crucial to draw with your brush the many small halftone forms that create the character and personality of your sitter. … Restating the lights is another very important step, but not quite so difficult as the previous one because there are far fewer light tones to record and correct.** Again, it's difficult to give precise directions as the physical and spiritual likeness of the subject becomes more particular. Two points to always remember: **(1) Observe carefully and (2) Every stroke is a drawing stroke!**"

In order to paint the critical areas around his subject's eyes, nose, and mouth, Sanden switched from using

His Highness the Emir of Kano 2005, oil, 78 x 54. Collection The Royal Palace, Kano, Nigeria.

Arlene Gibson
2006, oil, 36 x 30. Collection
The Spence School, New York,
New York.

cadmium orange; and a second halftone for painting the transition between light and shadow areas made by mixing Permalba white, yellow ochre, cadmium red light, and viridian.

Lights

Sanden recommends working with three light values, the first a clear color for the lightest lights made from a combination of Permalba white, yellow ochre, and cadmium red light; a second basic flesh tone developed with Permalba white, yellow ochre, cadmium red light, and cerulean blue; and a third pinkish flesh color for ruddy areas in light mixed from Permalba white, yellow ochre, cadmium red light, and cerulean blue.

Sanden emphasizes that the Pro Mix Color System colors are almost never used straight from the tube but are adjusted with additions from the standard colors or another Pro Mix color based on observation of the subject. Each set includes a 20-page instructional booklet.

Sanden's Palette

THE PRO MIX COLOR SYSTEM PALETTE

Neutrals

Sanden uses three values of neutral mixtures made from combinations of Permalba white, ivory black, and yellow ochre.

Darks

Two dark values made from combinations of burnt sienna, viridian, and cadmium orange.

Halftones

One cool halftone used for painting receding planes achieved by mixing Permalba white, yellow ochre, cadmium red light, chromium oxide green, and

PALETTE

ultramarine blue
cerulean blue
viridian
chromium oxide green
alizarin crimson
burnt umber
burnt sienna
cadmium orange
Venetian red
cadmium red light
yellow ochre
cadmium yellow light
ivory black
Permalba white

a bristle brush to a sable because the softer hairs would give him more control over the paint. When the artist turned his attention back to the areas of the painting outside the face, he returned to using bristle brushes so his strokes would be broad and the transitions between colors and values would be subtler.

One of the hallmarks of a Sanden portrait is the management of hard and soft edges. He has an exceptional ability to capture the likeness of a person's facial structure and features with hard edges that bring attention to the most important areas of the painting; and he balances those clear definitions with softer transitions between the figure and the background in peripheral areas. **In most of his portraits there is a point at which the person's hair seems to melt into the background and thereby unify the entire painting. He also allows some of the brushmarks in the peripheral areas to remain obvious and sketchy so there is a balance between the illusion of a person and the reality of the paint.**

Sanden's career as a portraitist has spanned three decades. He is widely regarded as one of the foremost teachers of professional portrait methods, he is the founder of The Portrait Institute, in New York City, and he has toured the nation teaching his ideas and techniques to thousands of artists. He has been commissioned to paint more than 500 public officials, business leaders, and private individuals, and he is represented by several major portrait brokers. In 1994, The American Society of Portrait Artists presented Sanden with their first John Singer Sargent Medal for Lifetime Achievement. For more information on Sanden, visit his websites: www.johnhowardsanden.com, www.worldofportraitpainting.com, and www.portraitinstitute.com.

Isaac Stern at Carnegie Hall
2006, oil, 84 x 46. Collection the artist.

A artist daily

Demonstration

1

Sanden first established the placement and scale of the woman's head and then drew her facial features and hair.

2

Using a warm shadow color, the artist massed in the hair and shadows along the side of the face and under the neck.

3

Following the procedures he recommends in his books and videos, Sanden then painted the shadows in the lower third of the face.

4

The artist lightened the value of the flesh color and painted the middle third of the face; then he used an even lighter color to block in the forehead.

5

Before refining the painting of the face, Sanden blocked in the background and blouse so he would have references with which to judge the relative value and color temperature of the flesh tones.

6

The next critical step in the painting process was to restate the shadows, midtones, and highlights.

7

Using a soft sable brush, Sanden painted the details of the woman's facial features and blended the description of her hair with the background colors.

The completed painting

Portrait of Pam McMahon
2005, oil, 24 x 20. Collection the artist.