

STEP BY STEP PROCESS OF CREATING A PORTRAIT

I. Concept Sketch

II. Paintbrush drawing on canvas

III. Color relationships The first layer

IV. Working on the details

1. The eyes
2. The nose
3. The mouth and chin
4. The edges of color spots:
face, light and shade,
hair
5. The neck and shoulders

V. Final step

Unifying the painting,
adjusting color relationships,
establishing hierarchy of the details

One of the tasks of academic training is to teach students to conduct work in the correct order, so that they are able to freely express their feelings and thoughts in their creative work.



I. CONCEPT

Before starting work on a portrait you should determine what it is that attracted you to this particular scene: combinations of colors, the character, the emotional state of the model. This impression should be remembered until you finish work on a portrait. If you work emotionally, you will inevitably be able to see wholly. This will have a positive effect on the drawing and the color relationships. Besides, your feelings will be “recorded” with the paints and will be transmitted to the viewer. The evidence of that are wonderful portraits painted by Nikolai Fechin (1), Velasquez (2), Gainsborough (3).



1



2



3

MATERIALS



1



2



3



4

Canvas

The canvas used for painting is usually linen (1). It should be strong and not too thin. Student works often have to be taken off their subframes and kept in rolls. Paint often breaks and crumbles on thin canvas. Synthetic canvas stretches a lot which is damaging for dry paintings when they are re-stretched on the subframe.

Ground

Ground used by artists nowadays can be classified by:

- *content* — glue based (absorbent), emulsion based (semi-absorbent) and oil based (non-absorbent);
- *texture* — large grain, medium grain, smooth;
- *color* — white and color ground.

A ground is not just a basis for a layer of paint, it also affects the appearance of paint. White ground makes paint “sing” in full. Color ground sets the tone of the picture and harmonizes the colors. On the dark ground, paint “sinks in” (dark ground shows through and the colors look darker). It requires numerous re-applications of paint. Artists use this effect for modelling shape.

Smooth oil based ground allows the use of layers of paint (glazes), and allows varnishing a painting to create a glossy surface. The appearance of a smooth surface of a painting is created by smooth surface of the ground, and not by how thoroughly an artist smoothed out the paint.

Different artists used different types of ground depending on a task. Karl Brullov mainly used smooth oil ground in golden color (2). Ilya Repin liked a not very absorbent white ground (3). In his later work he preferred large grain canvas which today is called “Repin canvas”.

Nikolai Fechin used very absorbent glue based ground (5) that allowed him to create active textures and bright painting. Sometimes artists used the color of an unprimed canvas, painting right on the glue sizing, like Valentin Serov in this portrait of Sergey Dyagilev (4). Old Masters used various color grounds: Rembrandt and Velasquez – gray, El Greco – red-brown, Caravaggio – dark brown...

For our exercise we shall use a canvas primed with white emulsion gesso. Ready to use gesso and primed canvases are available in stores.



5



1



2



3



4



5

Paints

There is a variety of paints available on the market. All paints are acceptable, but one should know how to use them in a skilled manner. It is better to start with paint made with natural pigments (1). They are less active than the chemically created ones; it is easier to avoid “mud” when mixing them. You need to experiment with each color. Old masters had a very limited palette.

Brushes

Natural bristle brushes (2) are the most commonly used in oil painting. They can be round or flat. The choice of the type of a brush depends on the creative tasks and personal preferences of the artist. For example, flat brushes are convenient for modelling a shape with color. Round brushes are convenient for creating soft edges. You don't need many brushes – too many of them is a nuisance. A canvas is “developed” with wider brushes. For painting a face smaller brushes are used. Background can even be painted with a wide flat decorator's brush. For painting sharp edges it is recommended to use round kolinsky brushes №2.

It is helpful to use two brushes of each size: one for cold, another for warm colors. It would help to preserve correct relationships of cold and warm tones and avoid “mud” in your work. Two brushes are convenient for adjusting the edges. Brushes must be thoroughly cleaned after each session.

Thinners

In the process of work an artist needs to thin the paint. The most common thinner is linseed oil. Linseed oil is also used as a bonding agent for pigment in oil paint.

Oil is applied on canvas in a very thin layer before the start of the work. During the painting process, if the oils have dried up, it is necessary to do inter-layer coating. It prevents the work from hardening, bonds the layers of paint and allows painting soft edges. Inter-layer coating can be done with retouching varnish (4), available in stores. You can use a “triple-mix”: 1 part of linseed oil, 1 part of pinene, ¼ part of dammar varnish (3). Brushes may be rinsed in a cheaper white spirit or turpentine.

Palette

Palettes (5) may be of various shapes and sizes. The size of a palette should be related to the tasks the artist sets. It is desirable to arrange colors on a palette in a certain order. An artist becomes accustomed to this arrangement and can take the correct paint without even looking. There are usually two oil containers attached to a palette: one for turpentine used for rinsing brushes, the other one for oil or a triple mix used for painting. A palette should be kept clean.



1



2

In a study (1) for the portrait of V. Bitner (2), publisher of a popular science magazine "Vestnik Znaniy", Ilya Repin aimed to capture the internal state of his sitter and the atmosphere of his office.

Sketch

It is recommended to make a small sketch before you start work. The sketch should reflect the concept and your impression of the model. Even without any details the sketch must convey an impression of the completed work.



BAD
The image is too large



BAD
The image is too small



BAD
The head should not be placed in the center of canvas when painted from this angle



GOOD

The purpose of a sketch is to achieve the following:

1. Composition. Finding the mass and silhouettes of different color spots.
2. Establishing color and value relationships.
3. Choosing the colors you will paint this scene with.
4. Texture. Each color spot should have its own type of brushstrokes.

It is preferable to paint the sketch on the same type of surface as the actual portrait. Sometimes students use brown or grey cardboard or white paper which yellows under oil. Paint works differently on such surfaces.

Outline the correct canvas proportions before you start working on your sketch. It is useful to keep margins; it would allow you, if necessary, to easily correct your composition in the end of the process.

Our task is to complete a student exercise "Head with shoulders". We shall use a 40cm x 50cm canvas.

One sketch is usually not sufficient, it is best to create several options, to try different colors.

A drawing for an oil painting can be created by different methods. In this book we shall review three methods using our exercises as examples.

The first method is a paintbrush drawing on canvas. The second method is a charcoal drawing on canvas fixed by oil paint (page 38). The third method is a charcoal drawing fixed by water based paint (page 56).

