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Capture Characteristic Impressions in Portraits
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Capture Characteristic Impressions in Portraits

During a workshop in Tennessee, Michael Shane Neal showed how following specific procedures would help avoid the stiff, overworked appearance of portraits based on photographs

Visit the websites of most portrait painters or flip through the portfolios they display during the annual Portrait Soiciety of America convention and you will likely see thousands of completely lifeless paintings that bear the tell tale signs of having been slavishly copied from photographs.
There is too much contrast between the dark and light values, the shadow areas are too flat, the facial features are outlined, the colors lack richness and temperature variation, and the toothy smiles look unnatural.

Do any of these problems stand in the way of a carreer of selling commissioned portraits? Not really. But are the artists likely to experience the pleasure of really getting to know their clients? Will those painters feel accomplished in advancing their skills and perceptions? Are other professionals sure to recognize their achievements? Not likely.

Artists who understand there is more to portraiture are eagerly signing up for workshops with artist who create oustanding paintings that capture the specific appearace of individual people. "The object of the student should be to acquire sufficient command over his materials and do whatever nature presents him. The conventionalities of portrait painting are only tolerable in one who is a good painter," said John Singer Sargent in 1901, and those who teach portraiture best wholeheartedly agree with that notion.

Michael Shane Neal believes so firmly in Sargent's statement that he includes it on the opening page of a 100-page notebook he provides workshop students. "Because I agree so strongly in Sargent's advice, I start every workshop by emphasixing the five principles that apply to painting any subject," he explains. "I discuss and demonstrate how to handle drawing, value, and stucture (or volume), edges, and color; and I explain how those relate to landscape, still life, abstraction, or portraiture. An artist has to understand those principles before he or she can deal with the particular challenges of capturing the charactrer and likeness of a person.

"Drawing is the natural place to begin," Neal continues. "It's so critical to one's ability to handle the elemental aspects of picture-making. It's through drawing that one developes an understanding of porportion, shape, and placement; and it's the exercise that helps and artist develop the motor coordination to paint what he or she sees."

Like those of many painters, Neal's drawings emphasize tone rather than line. He makes broad strokes with a graphite pencil or stick of charcoal to quickly indicate the pattern of light and shadow rather than lay down the outlines of those shapes. "Anthony Ryder and I were both demonstrating at one of the meetings of the Portrait Society of America, and we talked about how we approached drawing differently," Neal remembers. "Anthony draws the contours of shapes and then fills in the values from light to dark, whereas I clock in the shadow patterns and then work from the general to the specific. Either approach can be effective. It's a matter of preference."

When discussing the importance of drawing, Neal explains that it isn't necessary to have precise measurements when recoding the appearace of a subject. "Sargent often translated a figure as being much longer than it really appeared," Neal explains. "He might even have lengthened a nose to accentuate

a quality of likeness, but the drawings of paintings felt correct. A master draftsman can push and pull a drawing to accentuate a particular feeling, response, or movement."

Drawing Principles

1. Quickly memorize the silhouettes of the masses to capture the essential proportion and gestures.

2. Draw the contour of the light and dark masses and make this outline expressive.

3. Keep areas of light and shadow simple and distinct.

4. Get the constuction of the masses correct in their relationship before refining and adding detail. Compare the direction and proportion of several forms at once. To establish placements, look at the relationship between several points simultaneously.

5. First think of shapes geometrically.

6. See the mass as the whole and draw the essential shape. Draw what you see and not what you think you see.

7. Look for negative space to help you with judging relationships.

8. Enhance a beautiful curve by placing a strait line beside it for contrast. Straight line helps to keep curved lines in check. Avoid too much of either.

9. When the form is complex, you may need to draw the shape of each plane and keep its edge will defined until you understand its structure. Shudy how small planes merge into larger and simpler planes.

Value

The second day of a Neal workshop is usually devoted to the issue of value. "One of the most important principles in painting is understanding value relationships. Value, or the lightness or darkness of an object, is imperative for creating solidity of form," he explained. "When one value is incorrectly placed against another, the result is usually lack of form of depth, or flow from one shape to another. Artists must constantly ask themselves, 'How light or dark is this shape compared to another shape?'

"Initially, break values into three simple statement: light, middle, and dark," Neal advised his students. "In doing this, deconstruct your composition as well--look at your subject and simplify it as much as possible. For example, what value is the figure as it relates to the head? Remember to squint to see these relationships more clearly and simply."

Going beyond an explanation of value, Neal helped workshop students understand the nature of the light and shadow; and he recommended that shadows be painted thin and transparent while areas of light be painted with thicker and more opaque mixtures of paint.

In the student notebook, Neal offers a number of quotes and comments to help students better understand value. One quote from Everett Raymond Kinstler suggest that students ask if an element of the subject "is a part of the light or a part of the shadow." Edmund Tarbell recommended, "when the artist paints the light, he is painting atmosphere."

To further explain the relationship of light and shadow. Neal advised, "There are two kinds of shadows: 1.) The shadow side of and object that is interrupting the source of light--it will be the darkest next to the light and will be influenced by the ambient light or bounced light as it gets farther away; and 2.) The cast

shadow of the same object-for example, on to the floor, wall, or face (such as the shadow of the nose on the cheek); it will be darkest nearest the object casting it.

"The shadow and light pattern are the foundation of the painting structure and must be strong enough to support the painting. Therefore, capture the basic broad pattern right away and hold onto it for dear life. Half-close your eyes to see the broad pattern and do not look to closely into the shadows. When you begin to paint the shadow make it a little lighter than it will ultimately be, and do not put in the bounced light at first.

Stucture and Volume

Neal advised his workshop students to think of the structure of what they were painting and identify the planes of space with strokes of a brush loaded with oil paint. To help in that effort, he advised them to consider whether the volume they were painting was more like a rounded ball or a sharp-edge box. "When you are painting a head, for example, you need to be aware of the underlying stucture of the skeleton," he said. "consider where the form is rounded and therefore needs to be identified with subtle changes or whether it is angular and should be painted with clean, distinct strokes of the brush. The subtle changes in shape transitions of edges between the well-stuctured planes create a sense of volume. Some planes will flow clearly one into the other while other will remain separated."

Edges

"The difference between a good painting and a great one is the sensitivity to edges," Neal told the workshop participants. "Most artist rely too heavily on hard edges, in part because they depend on photographs that average values and impose sharp separations between them.

Ther are two important types of edges: lost and found," he continued. "An inexperienced artist is tempted to 'find' too many edges. To avoid that, I recommend squinting when looking at the model so most edges disappear and only those that remain crisp in the area of focus are worth painting with clear distinction. Whistler sad to 'bring it out of the mist and then put it back into the mist.'

"Another way of getting more lost edges is to use larger brushes and simplify forms," Neal continued. "I often recommend that students put away all their small brushed so they are forced to use larger brushes than they are accustomed to. That will help them record an impression of what they see rather than the detailed representation of that subject. It's harder to paint sharp lines and hard edges with a big bristle brush than it is with a sable-hair brush.

"It also helps to simplify shapes," Neal added. "Robert Henri used to pose the model in one room and have the students paint in another after they studies the figure. That way they would only paint the simple forms they remember rather than the details they studied. The point was to see the overall effect and the most characteristic forms."

Color

"My strongest recommendation to students concerning color is that they work with a limited palette," Neal says. "If they keep the selection of tube colors down to a few that intermix well to offer a full range of hues and temperatures, they will find it much easier to establish harmonious relationships between those mixtures. Ultimately, value is more important than pigment selections."

In addition to basing color mixtures on value, Neal points out that color temperature is also important. "In most situations, the temperature of the light is the opposite of that of the shadow," he explains. "So, if warm sunlight is illuminating the light side of a tree, for example, the colors in the shadows will be cool. In simplest terms, you would push the light toward a warm yellow and the shadow toward a cool purple. Conversely, on an overcast day the light might be a coolblue tone and the shadow would be a warm color.

To make the appropriate judgments about color, Neal recommends that his students use a wooden palette that approximates the tone of the canvas. "It helps to judge the appropriateness of a color mixture against a palette that is the same color and value as the painting surface," he explained.

Painting Process

Once Neal has covered the basics of painting, he offers several painting demonstrations to show workshop participants how to handle some of the specific problems of painting a portrait. For example, he makes small studies of mouths, noses, eyes, and hands and recommends that students do the same when back in their studios. "The most critical parts of a portrait are those that carry the identity and character of the subject: the proportional relationship of the features and the specific appearance of the body parts," he explains. "Anyone who aspires to paint commissioned portraits should spend time understanding how to judge those relationships and paint those features with the same brushwork they use throughtout the painting process. Be careful not to noodle! Scape it off and try again!"

To show students how to paint a portrait from life, Neal demonstrated a head-and-shoulder painting of a model. He started with a quick drawing using a thin mixture of oil color to establish the top of the head, bottom of the chin, placement of the nose, ears, and eyes; then the lateral loccations of the shoulders. He blocked in the dark shadow areas of the subject and background. "Like many painters, I find it preferable to start by painting the shadow areas with a this micture of paint and graduallly move to the mid-tones and then the lighter values, gradually increasing the thickness of the paint," he explained.

Photography

Although Neal spends quite a bit of time during a workshop pointing out the pitfalls of working from photographs, he does admit there are many circumstances where an artist must rely on photographs in order to complete a portrait. "Many clients enjoy the process of posing for an artist, so it shouldn't be assumed that one must work from photographs," Neal advises. "However, I do understand that it can be very difficult to get young children to sit still for long periods of time or to get busy executives to devote the hours needed to complete a portrait from life. But even in those situations, there may be time to complete a color sketch from life.

"If it is necessary to paint a portrait from photographs, the experience of having painted from life will be tremendously valuable in interpreting the information contained in the snapshots. In these cases, artists should follow the same procedures of simplifying forms, painting with large brushes, judging value and color relationships, and softening edges, and the finished portrait will be far more successful."

The Business of Portraiture

Because Neal's workshop was held at The Factory at Franklin, in Tennessee, within easy driving distance of his Nashville studio, he invited the workshop participants to spend an evening in that space discussing the professional side of an artist's career. I know I get alot from that myself," Neal says. "I discussed my current commissions and passed out copies of the material I provide prospective clients so the students would understand the fees I charge and the procedures I follow."

Individual Critiques and Instuction

At some point during every workshop, Neal tries to find time to meet individually with each participant so he can review his of her work, offer comments and criticisms, and respond to question. "I love to teach because I learn from the students, and hopefully, I give them something that will be helpful," he says. "I have been so fortunate to have studied with great artists who shared everything they could, and I want to do the same."