Roberta Combs
The Portrait: Representational Drawing and Painting

Painting a portrait seems to be the most intimidating undertaking for an artist. We see people's faces more than any other subject available. We know how often we see our own features in the mirror. Yet, attempting to paint a portrait fills most painters with a definite anxiety.

A portrait is usually representational. The artist must have developed some degree of drawing skills. The main difference between a portrait and a landscape is that you must not be satisfied with less than an accurate recognizable rendering. "Close enough" is definitely NOT close enough. A face needs more assessing and adjusting than a tree in a landscape setting would. The artist must be satisfied that the likeness is very good before moving from drawing to painting. It's a good idea to draw the portrait on paper and transfer it to your support when you are satisfied. This ensures that you won't be removing surface by over-erasing or leaving lines or pressure marks before you begin. In addition, your placement of your subject will be optimum on your paper or canvas.

Facial features can be likened to a jigsaw puzzle. Everything is placed only in relation to where everything else is placed. Understanding of the distances between features will result in proper placement over all. One false placement will influence all following placement choices. There are general "rules" to help keep you on track but the individuality of each face makes them only guidelines. Work carefully and critically to complete your set up. It will save you time and confusion in the long run.

These are basic guidelines for the proportions of a person's features

The eyes are halfway between the top of the head and the chin

The bottom of the nose is halfway between the eyes and the chin

The mouth is halfway between the nose and the chin

The corners of the mouth line up with the centers of the eyes

The top of the ears line up with the center of the eyes

The bottom of the ears line up with the bottom of the nose

The distance between the centre of the eyes and the tip of the nose makes an equilateral triangle

The space between the eyes is equal to one eye width
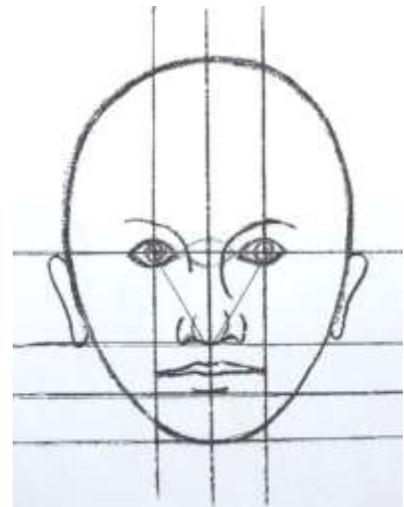
Features are not outlined areas. Every curve and swell is defined by light rather than line. It is shadow and light that exposes the form. Think of the shapes that lay under the skin to help focus on the roundness and bulges that are often downplayed by an artist.

Eyes are only alive when you touch on the most extreme ends of the value scale: black and white.

Eyeballs are completely round and irises have more than one color in them often because of reflections within them. Eyelids have mass that lay over top of the eye and cast a shadow. Think 3-d as you draw or paint them. Dead eyes are one of the most common problems in an unsuccessful portrait. Study the placement and shape of the lights in them. Draw what you see.

Ears are like fingerprints. They are unique and have a distinct pattern belonging to only one individual. This is one aspect that is often – and mistakenly - generically portrayed on a portrait but if you look closely, they are almost an individual portrait in themselves.

Perhaps the most important and challenging feature that defines a successful likeness is the mouth. More than any other feature, the mouth, whether opened or closed, will reveal the likeness of the individual subject. When it comes to teeth, less is more. Don't think individual squares of white. Focus on the "landscape" of the teeth – that bottom line you would run your tongue across. This is a unique feature that defines each individual's mouth.

And above all: **Paint what you see, not what you know**. When you look at the teeth and the "whites" of the eyes you see that there is very little (if any) pure white.


Artists see things differently than other people. We are always assessing whether a scene would make a good painting and deciding how we would render particular aspects of it. For example, we don't just see a copse of trees. We see detail and color, light and composition. A portrait is no different. When we really look, we will choose a number of shades and colors to render a believable "skin tone". Without cool colors to show the contrast of warm skin tones the portrait will be flat and lifeless. Just as you should not use brown for a tree trunk, you should not use flesh for a skin tone. Try to think of the colors going on underneath the surface and use them as you begin to layer. Colors that seem too strong can be layered over with a more neutral tone but will still infuse a lively presence in a subtle way. There may also be reflected color, from clothing for example. Are the shadows cool? Do they seem purple? Blue? Green?

With practice, you can learn to SEE all the colors that make up a seemingly simple surface.
 I stress again:

DRAW WHAT YOU SEE, NOT WHAT YOU KNOW.
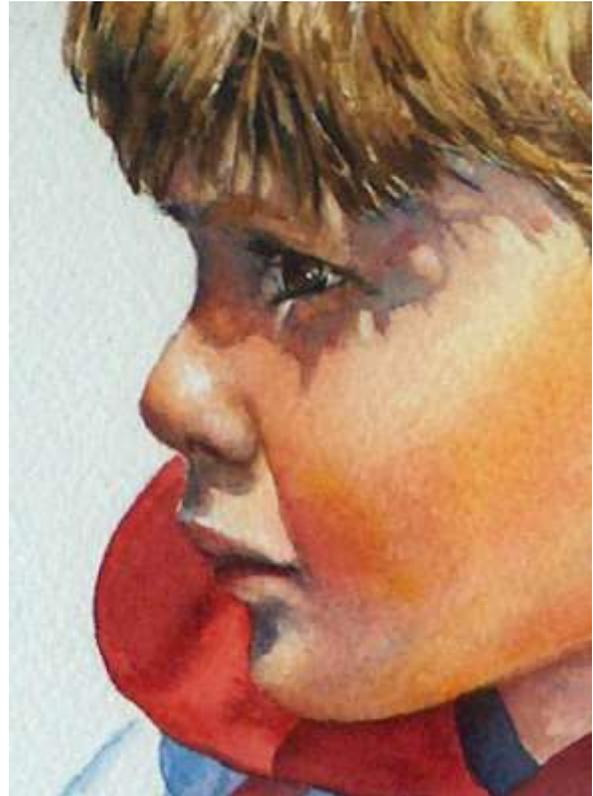
If you choose to draw and paint in a realistic style, you need to have good reference material. Artistic license allows you to embellish or simplify as you choose but this doesn't mean you should settle for "close enough". This is tempting to do if you feel rushed or overwhelmed with the detail that originally enticed you to select a challenging subject. Enjoy the process and stand back and view your progress frequently to see if adjustments are needed. It is sometimes helpful to view your work in a mirror.

With practice and an ever critical approach to your own work, you will find that there is actually no difference between rendering a portrait, a cup or a tree….or any subject you choose. They all follow the same rules. You can draw what you see if you really SEE what you draw. Don't be easily satisfied. And to keep it realistic…….

Draw what you see, not what you know.

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