

The Atelier Method

THE FINAL PORTRAIT

To conclude our five-part atelier-style guide to drawing and painting, Lavender Hill Studios' Nick Bashall talks us through a complete two-hour portrait painting demonstration. But first, fellow tutor Ann Witheridge underlines the importance of seeing

For this final article, our students gathered around to watch and learn, as my colleague Nick Bashall completed a portrait painting demonstration. One can learn so much from seeing another artist at work, just as one can learn so much from looking at the paintings of the Old Masters. A knowledge and understanding of art history can be just as important as learning to handle a brush or mix colour.

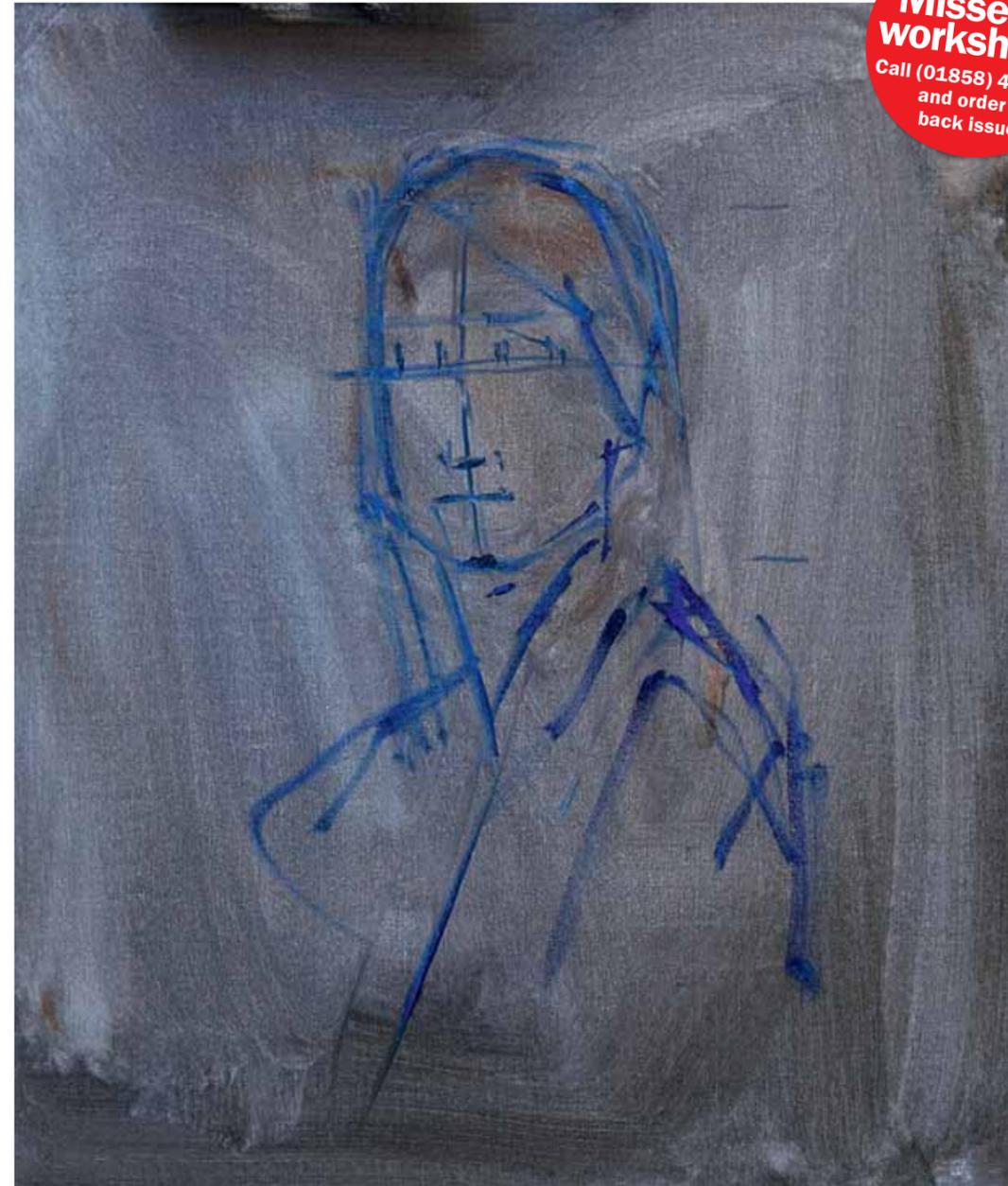
The term 'self-taught' can be a little deceiving; no one is truly self-taught.

BELOW Nick Bashall leads a portrait class at Lavender Hill Studios

They may have never studied with a dedicated art teacher but they will have most likely learned from books and been influenced in some way by another artist at some stage. (It would be an interesting experiment to see how a child's visual language would develop without any preconceived ideas of how we translate from nature by looking only at nature. As tempting as this experiment would be, I felt it would be unkind on my daughters, particularly as there are too many good children's illustrators out there!)

Demonstrations are key to our teaching method at Lavender Hill Studios. And for those unable to go to live classes, transcripts such as the one that follows over the page can be equally informative, too.

A finished painting can be exciting but the methodology can be even more inspiring. Likewise seeing a painting by Velázquez or Sargent can inspire, uplift and sometimes even stupefy – how did this artist manage to achieve that? And though we are by no means anywhere near the level of



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composition in our first workshop on proportion. The top of the egg should then indicate the top of the sitter's skull – usually you won't be able to see this because of the sitter's hair.

Why chose a top line you can't see, you might ask? It helps me establish a starting point for the distances between the features – for example on an average head, the bottom of the eyes will be half way between the top of the skull and the chin. Likewise, the bottom of the nose is usually at the midpoint between the bottom of the eyes and the chin. These are useful starting points and I can indicate these fairly accurately without even looking at the model.

Unfortunately the next line to mark in, the eyebrow line, doesn't follow any such rules because it varies so much from person to person. The line representing the bottom of the eyes runs parallel with the eyebrow line, forming a band that I call "the raccoon strip" because if you were to paint it black, it would look like the animal's marking. Again, the width of that raccoon strip varies so much from one person to another – even sometimes on the same person with different expressions. For example, if you were to paint a man with bushy, raised eyebrows, he would appear to have a much wider raccoon strip than if you painted a similar face with pencil thin eyebrows and a frown. The hairline is another that obeys no hard and fast rules. It can vary, particular in older men, while hair can be worn down over the eyebrows or slicked back over the skull.

Aside from these visible lines, I also draw a vertical guideline through the centre of the face, which runs from the top of the skull, between the eyebrows and down through the middle of the mouth and chin. (This will be a straight line if you're looking at your sitter face on; slightly curved if not). This directional guide is useful and I will constantly refer back to it, using it to make marks equidistant on either side to determine the width of the mouth, nose and eyes.

For more information on Lavender Hill Studios and the courses they offer, visit www.lavenderhillstudios.com. Turn over for the final portrait demonstration...

such great masters, the demonstration is key to the students' learning. This is the wonderful bonus of the atelier system, too, whereby students work among their peers and teachers, learning from one another.

WORKSHOP 5

For this month's workshop, we are combining the four areas we have covered over the previous four issues: proportion, line and volume, chiaroscuro, and colour. By concentrating on the lessons learned so far, you should be able to progress successfully through all stages of this

portrait demonstration. As each stage follows on from one another, getting each one right before you progress is pivotal in order to achieve a satisfactory outcome. With this in mind, getting the proportions right can be the most important part of the demonstration over the page.

Once I have loosely sketched out the rough size of the head, I then draw an inverted egg shape, which represents the top and bottom of the skull. The bottom of the 'egg' is the subject's chin and once in place that line will never, ever change. Think of it like the bottom line of the still life

ABOVE Sketching out the proportions is the key to a successful portrait

A COMPLETE PORTRAIT

This 10-step demonstration shows the various stages of a two-hour portrait painting session at Lavender Hill Studios. If you are trying this at home, the key is to avoid attempting to add details to the painting too early in the process; if the dark, middle and light masses are in the right place, the likeness will come. And likewise, no amount of detail will produce a likeness later on if the main masses are in the wrong place at the start.

1 The first thing to do is cover up the white of the canvas. It's not essential but I like to scrub on a wash of paint mixed with turps as it evaporates, so the paint dries quickly – you can get some quite interesting effects with this layer if you play around. In terms of colour, you could use browns, reds, blues, blacks; any possible transparent colours that would allow the white of the canvas to come through.

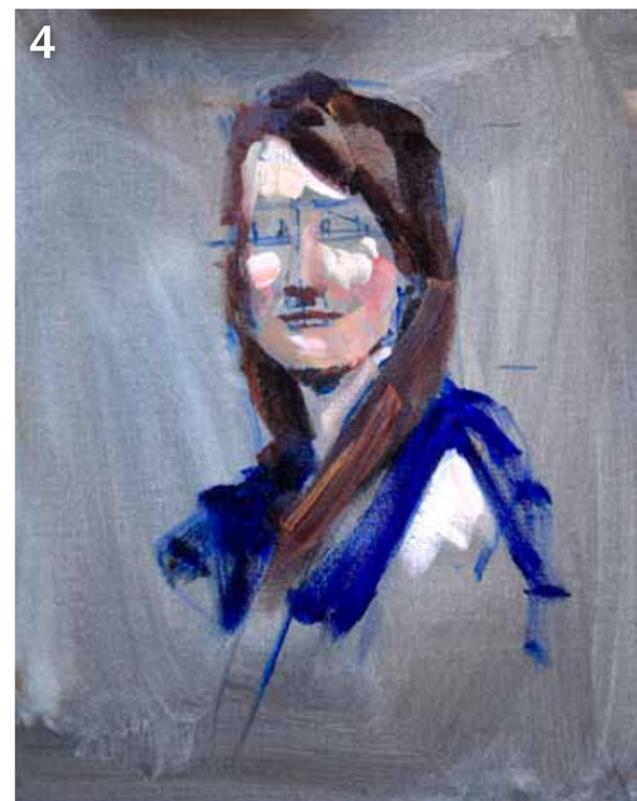
However, I strongly suggest you don't use white at all; even a small amount mixed with other colours will mix into everything you paint thereafter, preventing you from getting truly dark shadows later on.

2 Start by placing the head on the canvas and deciding how large you want to make it – larger than, equal to, or smaller than life-size? To decide on this, I usually do a loose sketch in a couple of minutes first, not much more than an oval with hair, a neck and a hint of shoulders. Next map out the various guidelines detailed in the workshop above. It is important to get the horizontals of the eyebrow line and the bottoms of the eyes, nose and mouth all more or less parallel as they would appear in life; if the head is tilted at all, those lines should all be slightly off the horizontal.



3 You may remember in the chiaroscuro workshop that we began by massing in the darker areas with charcoal – here you should do the same, applying thin layers of your darkest colours so you can work over them later. Although the detail of the hair does not matter much at this stage, it is useful to block it in as it helps to outline the head and the neck. I also apply the two main highlighted areas – the forehead and the shoulder – as they are striking and give me a better idea of the painting's tonal range.

4 Working from the bottom line of the chin upward, begin to mass in the skin tones of the chin and cheek. I picked out the angle of the nose, just marking it with a bit of red coming down the side. I also painted in a suggestion of the mouth, with a bit of red, black and a touch of white. Don't be frightened of really just whacking the paint on the canvas at this stage to develop a sense of the main areas of colour and tone.



5 Next, I painted the main dark areas of the faces, both under the chin and in the eye sockets. Note how I made no attempts to mark out details at this stage – the black areas on the eyes should make it look as if your sitter is wearing dark glasses. I also lightened up the top lip and softened the dark under the chin.

6 At this stage, I was further refining the shape and colour of the face. The detail photo reveals how much the surface of the painting can look like a patchwork quilt when you view it up close. Don't worry about it at this stage – the real refinement comes later.

7 Further refinement is taking place. You can see how a patchwork of colour is beginning to disappear and the main areas are emerging as we begin to add further paint on top of that initial base.



8 I slightly adjust the angles of the light and the dark strokes to help refine the eye sockets and the area around the mouth. Throughout the painting process, I kept going back to the mouth. The mouth is a thing of simplicity yet will always be changing – don't fight the urge to refine or correct it. In my opinion, the shape of a mouth better reflects the sitter's state of mind more than the eyes; one can lie with the eyes, but not with the mouth, which tightens a fraction when it is being untrue.

9 At some point you have to bite the bullet and do the detail of the eyes. The eyes and the mouth are the last areas of detail. I try and keep the darks and lights clean, and am careful to note the bit between the eyelash and the brow – a crucial distance. The pinpoint of light in the eyes I leave until the very end. They make the eyes suddenly jump to life – an impressive but easy trick.

10 With the larger areas done, you can now play with the detail and refine endlessly using smaller and smaller brushes as you go. It's still rough as it is and could be refined further, but I think there is a beauty in the fast, impromptu brushwork. You will note that the thick white stroke on the arm didn't change from the beginning to the end. Even with more time, I probably would have left it like that.

