

# Paint Workshops and Portrait Demonstrations: a hands-on exploration of painting technique in and out of the studio

Jessica David, Associate Conservator of Paintings, Yale Center for British Art

Working in the painting conservation department at the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) provides frequent opportunities to engage with Yale students and other scholars, like STITAH participants, in discussions about painting materials and techniques common to western, if not specifically British, art. The evolution of the painter's palette and division of studio labor, from pigment preparation to design transfer and the stages of painting, are explored with the intention of applying this material awareness towards an understanding of condition, or the life cycle of a painting after it leaves the studio. It became clear during the process of teaching about painting practice that some hands-on component was necessary to contextualize the glossary lists of technical terms and concepts of condition.



A STITAH participant grinds cochineal red lake

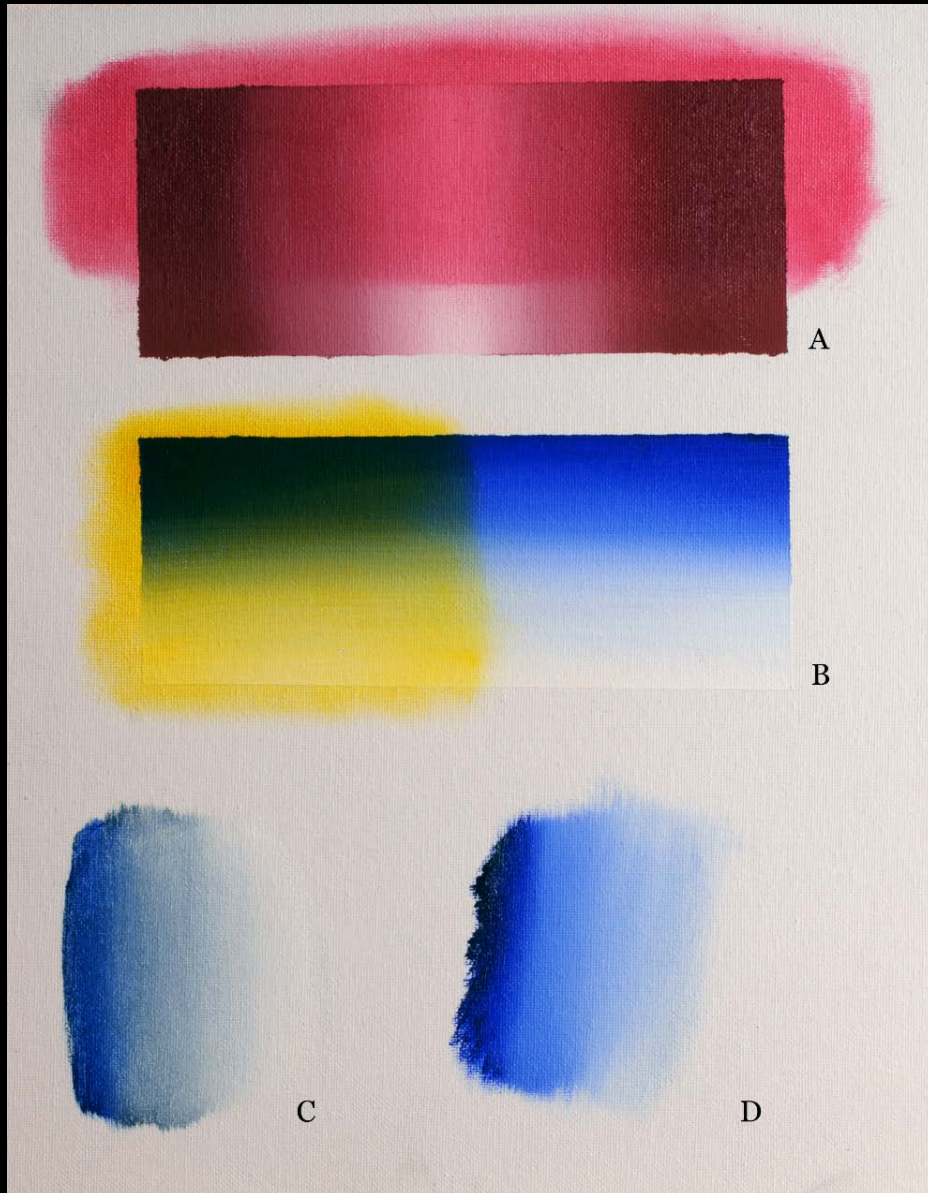


A workshop table prepared with demo boards

The scope of these sessions varies to include a spectrum of painted surfaces and paint mediums (egg tempera, distemper, oil and acrylic) or focuses on one medium, like oil paint, and its varied characteristics. Classes typically begin with a broad introduction to paint-the definitions of direct and indirect painting, glaze and scumble-and evolve into first-hand experimentation with these techniques. The viscosity, opacity and feel of the paint are discussed at each stage, which later helps the class identify similar layers on paintings hanging in the gallery, even if their condition is greatly altered. The exercise or demonstration boards can provide further information about the drying behavior, hue change and surface sheen of various paints long after the session has ended.



Oil paints of various hue and opacity are painted out over four different ground colors (white, gray, black and transparent brown) to see the impact of the underlying hues on the upper paint layers and to observe the drying behavior of each painted strip.



**Left.** a painting demonstration board completed with the 2015 STITAH group, on which (A) a cochineal red glaze was applied over a dry paint layer, a gradation of red earth and lead white. (B) shows a yellow buckthorn glaze applied over a dry gradation of French ultramarine and white. Both exercises demonstrate indirect painting and the glazes' respective tinting strengths and workability. Exercises C & D demonstrate direct or wet-in-wet painting. Participants were asked to produce their own gradations using two blue pigments and white, the first (C) with a reluctant, hand ground smalt blue, the second (D) with an easily manipulated, industrially ground French ultramarine.

Experimenting with glaze pigments like red and yellow lake or copper green resinate, and focusing specifically on their ability to be spread thinly as veils of color, introduces students to the strategy behind indirect painting: the breakdown of labor into slower, more easily controlled steps; the economy of applying paint in thin, discreet layers with more costly pigments reserved for the upper-most layers; also the timeline of completing a painting in which each layer must dry before the next is applied, as opposed to a direct or *à la prima* painting system.



While these workshops are helpful in developing the group's awareness of the artist's palette, methods of paint application and painting terminology, it can be a stretch to compare these swatches of pigment to a finished painting. As a second phase to the group exercise, I have developed a live portrait painting demonstration process that allows students to watch a painting's production from drawing to varnishing within a one-hour session. Like a cooking show, each step is completed in advance to eliminate the delay of drying time, meaning that there are 5-6 pre-prepared panels ready to be brought to the next stage of painting when the exercise begins.



-----STAGE 1-----      -----STAGE 2-----      -----STAGE 3-----

Former post graduate conservation fellow at the YCBA, Kristin, was the first to sit for a one hour portrait session. Her likeness was transferred using white chalk, which is not very visible on the buff color ground, but has the advantage of completely disappearing on contact with oil paint. The painting process was divided into three stages, completed over five canvas boards.

Each stage, or board, represents a significant phase of painting based loosely on historical manuals on portrait painting, such as Thomas Bardwell's *The Practice of painting and perspective made easy* [...], from 1756. According to Bardwell, portrait painting can be divided into three major stages or sittings and each of these may comprise up to two paint applications. Every stage requires a fresh palette of pre-mixed hues. Bardwell's system for palette setting is notoriously complex (Kirby & Groen 1975) so for the sake of time and clarity I simplified his palette and emphasized what I interpret as the salient point of each stage.

Stage 1: creating a tonal impression over the drawing, which seals the loose drawing material and creates what Bardwell calls a "Claro Oscuro" or "Mezzotino" (Bardwell 9), a monochrome depiction of tonal values.



**Roxy, Stage 1 or 'first painting'**



On the portraits of Roxy and Claire, the drawing was transferred with black charcoal through thin brown paper. The drawing lines were reinforced with a medium-rich brown ocher, which was then thinned with oil to capture the subtle shifts of value across their flesh and hair. Bardwell recommends using pre-mixed tints for this phase of painting but I chose to use a simple brown hue for the first application, a technique that is visible in the unfinished portraits of painters like Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), Johan Zoffany (1733-1810) and Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830), examples of which are on view at the YCBA.

Once the brown tonal underpainting is dry, cool mid-tone shadows are added (a mixture of white, a bright red like cadmium, a red lake or alizarin and yellow ocher). The warm shadows come next, comprised of the same pigments listed above with the addition of dark brown ocher and raw umber.



### **Claire, Stage 1**

The first panels shows the brown tonal underpainting only. The second panel has received cool mid-tone shadows and the third shows the addition of warm mid-tone shadows.

Bardwell, among other writers on painting technique, emphasizes the need to 'oil out' between phases of painting (he recommends poppy oil) to aid wetting and saturate the dry paint surface before new paint is added (see also de Mayerne 1620: 46; Smith 1692: 80; Lairessee 1707, vol. 1: 14). The necessity of this step is very obvious in the live portrait demonstration as each board is completely dry and often uneven in gloss when introduced, the brown passages matt and sunken.



### **Roxy, Stage 2**

Cool and warm mid-tone shadows have been added. The cool shadows, which contain raw umber, have a particular tendency to sink. These areas in need to be 'oiled out' before the next stage of painting in order to assess the tonal balance accurately.



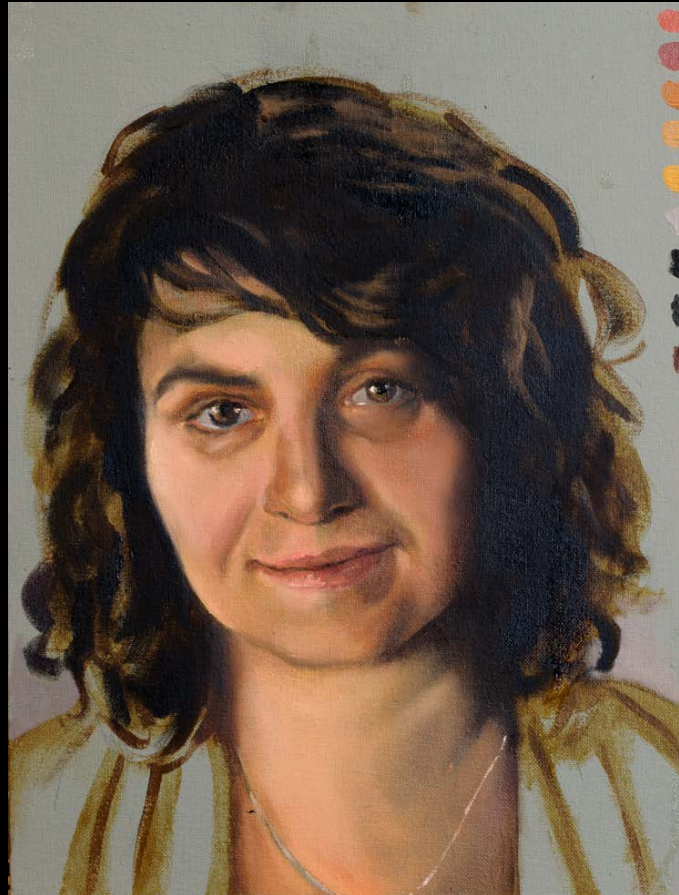
The development of likeness is most obvious in stage 2. This can be attributed to the addition of dark, defining shadows around the facial features and rosy flesh hues on the cheeks and lips. As the portrait progresses, the sitter's presence and energy level become important to capturing their individuality and character: Claire's smile becomes more defined, Roxy's expression more animated. Highlights are added to the bridge of the nose, cheeks and lips. Rosy shadows are reinforced with pure red lake or alizarin and facial proportions are modified with a deep brown ocher.



**Claire and Roxy, Stage 2**



The final stage of painting involves the least amount of paint application. Dabs of a very light flesh tint are added to the side of the face nearest the light source, transparent shadows (thinned with drying oil or medium) are applied to the opposite side of the face to balance its overall tonal value. Bardwell notes that there is no need to oil out the panel before the final stage of painting, as the finishing touches of paint are so minimal. Though discreet, these last touches are the most important to documenting expression. For the first time pure white is applied, discreetly, to the eyes and lips, defining the direction of the sitter's gaze and the attitude of the mouth. The somewhat dead expression of the eyes is transformed at this point.



**Claire and Roxy, Stage 3**

The 'stages of portraiture' boards serve a purpose beyond the live demonstration. Once a reasonable drying time has passed they can be used to illustrate the effects of varnishing but their most useful function occurs in later discussions about painting condition. While these portraits are not reconstructions of old master paintings, their stratigraphy is comparable to many portraits at the YCBA. Therefore, students are able to discern from aged portraits in the gallery what qualities of the paint layer might have changed. Has the upper glaze of deep pink faded on the cheeks, have the final strokes of dark brown earth been over-cleaned in the hair, is the varnish uneven?



This exercise has been an on-going learning experience for me as well. It has both aided my understanding of historical treatises on painting and changed the way I describe the condition or 'unpacking' of a painting with students and colleagues.

**Live studio portrait demonstration with Roxy**



## Bibliography

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