

Sketching the Portrait Subject

Preparation for the Final Work

by Luana Luconi Winner

As a portrait artist, one must find a way to efficiently tell the story of the subject of the painting. The preparatory sketch work is the key to finding the most beautiful composition and likeness. During the initial sketches, the sitter is often fighting off nerves worrying about how to sit still, how they really look, and how to remain comfortable as the artist stares at them.

With pad and pencil in hand, the artist can engage the sitter in relaxed conversation without fear of the dreaded camera-snapped, awkward expressions. Relaxing the sitter is of utmost importance encouraging a more beautifully rendered sketch and painting, and preventing the “snap shot syndrome” seen in too many of today’s portraits-from-photos.

Prior to our first meeting, we will have already discussed clothing choices, background possibilities in office or home settings, general coloration of the painting, and where the portrait will hang. All of these elements set the mood and general feeling of formality or informality for the final painting.

MATERIALS AND PRODUCTS

- 80 lb. Cream colored 400 Series Spiral Bound Field Diary 7 x 10
- 100 lb. 300 Series Bristol Board Vellum Finish 11 x 14
- Graphite pencils in 4H, 2H, HB, 2B, 4B, 6B
- Charcoal/chalk
- 300 Series Canvas Paper for color notes/ experiments and written notation to be used with Oil or Alkyd paints

“Luana Luconi Winner is a wonderful portrait painter, capturing the true essence of her subjects.”

– Paula Rogalski, *Editor-Strathmore Artist Newsletter*



When I arrive at the client's chosen location,

I am prepared to do dozens of sketches. On cream or middle gray paper, I do graphite sketches or charcoal sketches heightened with chalk for real three dimensional studies. The quick studies concentrate on the smaller parts...an eye/nose combination or the turn of the ear/jaw into the neck/shoulder area or the hands.

The sitter and I will engage in casual conversation all the while I do gestural sketches to get a feel for their face and hands in natural unposed situations. This allows me the opportunity to get to know the distinctive features without the interruption of a camera. The camera tends to push people unconsciously into unnatural facial poses providing the artist with big "cheesy" grins and squinting, wrinkled eyes. I look for the more relaxed, pleasant smile.



The sketching process allows the artist to observe and gather comfortable expressions and body language. A characteristic a turn of the head, placement of the hands, or twinkle in the eye is what I am after at this point.



When warm up sketches have been completed,

I turn to the larger pad of Bristol board to begin more serious attempts at specific likeness. At this stage the subject is very relaxed, less self-conscious, and familiar with the process.

I will ask them to maintain a position that seems specific to them and their normal movements, and I begin more accurate, larger 11 x 14 drawings.



The new graphite sketches are now more about composition, and together we will try five to eight different positions in vertical and horizontal formats that feel natural. Now I am dealing with the flow and movement of the composition, not the likeness or the facial details.

A posed photo or painting always looks posed. It is most important to avoid this in a painting that is to last for multiple generations. Therefore, this series of sketches is the most critical part of the portrait process. Sometimes due to the grand size of the canvas, a painting will take between one to three months to paint. The sketches and color studies will “model” for me when the subject cannot. They must be accurate.



The only completely finished sketch done on site will be a head study at the end of the sitting. The subject has now reached a level of confidence about the process, the initial jitters of being stared at have dissipated, and a casual pleasant expression comes easily as we finish the two to three hours together.



Before I leave the location, I may snap a few digital shots of details of men's ties, women's clothing details, embroidery, lace, or jewelry, or upholstery details to add to my arsenal of materials from which to work the final painting. Adding to this, I may do a file page of color references. On a canvas paper, I list the client's name and location and then fill the page with swatches of color and written notes. This information is all about skin and clothing colors, background furnishings and drapery color, or any color that will affect the final composition. This is particularly important when working out of town or out of state.

When I return to the studio, I put everything up on a storyboard.

This will include the series of quick sketches, the parts and pieces gathered early on, the compositional sketches, the client-approved head sketch, and any digital and color sheet detail references. Now the best of the compositional sketches on the Bristol boards are cleaned with kneadable erasers and strengthened with deeper values. My final choices are sent back to the client whether it is a family portrait or a corporate piece that will be decided by a committee. From these sketches, the final pose is chosen. The painting begins and additional sittings are scheduled for the final stages of the painting.





“The copious amount of sketch work permits the client a level of comfort. They know what to expect. And I am satisfied that I have studied the person well enough to produce the best possible portrait.”

– Luana Luconi Winner

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A founding member of the Portrait Society of America, Luana Luconi Winner was schooled in Rome, Florence, Switzerland and the USA, and currently resides in North Carolina. A popular portrait artist, Luana's portraits and murals hang in corporations, universities, and residences on both sides of the ocean. Luana is a stimulating workshop teacher stateside and abroad. In June 2004, her newest international workshop will be in Northern Italy – Milan, the lake region, and Venice.

A popular speaker, Luana recently spoke at the Portrait Society of America International Conference in Washington, D. C. in April 2003, and demonstrated at the International Association of Pastel Societies Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico in May 2003.

She was filmed painting in her studio for a CNN story about giving heirlooms as gifts for the holidays, and her articles have appeared in International Artist Magazine and other popular trade magazines. Mrs. Winner has recently returned from participating in the Fourth Edition of the Biennale Internazionale dell'Arte Contemporanea (International Biennial of Contemporary Art), an invitation-al exhibition in Florence, Italy, December 2003.

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Visit Our Online Projects

We have a great Watercolor Journal project available in the [projects](#) section of our website that is easy to make and is a handsome way to journal subjects for future paintings. All the materials used in this project are acid free so your journal will last for years.



Call for Entries

The 2004 Strathmore Art Contest is still open for entries. Artists 18 years and older can submit entries in the category of their choice for cash prizes given to first, second, and third place winners. Over \$10,000 in prizes will be awarded.

Entries will be accepted in three categories; general art, student art, and digital art. There is no entry fee and the artwork must be created using Strathmore art papers.

This year's contest has begun to receive entries in these categories and will continue to do so until March 31, 2004. Be sure to check out the [contest rules](#) on our website and download an entry form today. Visit our past winners page and view the winning artwork from the previous two years.



Artist Messageboard

Ever have a question about the medium you are using, the best paper to use for a project, or just need an artist's perspective?

Go to www.strathmoreartist.com and sign up today to start getting the answers you need.

How Long Does Paper Last?

This is a very difficult question to answer as there are many reasons that come into play in the deterioration of paper. Some factors include the acidic level of the paper, the environment, and fiber used to make the paper.

Let's take a look at acid levels during the papermaking process. Most papers on the market today are called acid free (the pH level is based on a scale of 0 to 14 with 7 being neutral pH). Any paper with an acid rating above 7.0 can be called acid free. A higher pH rating will aid in the longevity of the paper.

Most of our papers are manufactured at a pH level of around 8.5 with a total alkaline paper chemistry. This means that all the materials used during the papermaking process are alkaline or have an acid rating above the neutral pH level.

The environment also plays a part in deteriorating paper. Calcium Carbonate is added as a buffer to combat atmospheric acids that attack paper fibers which can deteriorate it over time. Calcium Carbonate is an alkaline reserve and neutralizes acids chemically. This is Chemistry 101. As the reserve neutralizes the acid molecules, the reserve eventually gets used up. However, this process takes a very long time so as long as the reserve is available to fight nature's acidic attacks, the fibers will be protected.

It is sometimes thought that yellowing is a sign that paper is deteriorating. This is sometimes true, but not in every case. Yellowing can be caused by two chemical components of papermaking, fluorescent (optical brighteners) and lignin.

Optical brighteners are fluorescent used to create a whiter sheet. Did you ever walk into a room lit by a black light wearing a white t-shirt and the shirt looks like it is glowing? These are fluorescent. As fluorescent used in paper are exposed to UV light, they turn yellow. This does not deteriorate the paper, it just changes the color. Most white fine art papers do not contain dyes or optical brighteners so that the color of the paper will remain true longer.

Lignin, on the other hand, is a natural compound of wood fiber and will aid in the yellowing and deterioration of paper over time. Alpha cellulose pulp is being used in most acid free, wood pulp sheets and this type of fiber is chemically treated to remove the lignin from the fiber to aid in the longevity of the paper. Some papers like newsprint are made with ground-wood pulp which contains lignin. This is why newsprint turns yellow and becomes brittle quicker than most other papers.

Cotton paper is still the best choice for longevity. Cotton is naturally lignin free and doesn't require as much chemical treatment as wood so the fibers also remain much stronger.

True papermaking has been around for about 2000 years and many strides have been made to make paper more permanent. Because of all the various factors effecting paper, the exact number of years a sheet of paper will last cannot be determined. We recommend to artists that they use the highest quality papers made with cotton fibers and buffered with calcium carbonate for artwork they want to last for generations. These papers may be more expensive, but an artist will spend many hours completing a piece of art so they will want it to last as long as possible.

New Products

Strathmore has introduced three new pads that are great for the student and accomplished artist alike. These pads were made available to retailers November of 2003 so you will start to see them on the retailers shelves. Check out our new product introduction on 400 Series Wet Media, Dry Media, and Gray Scale pads.

