

Designing an Idea Behind the Portrait: The Idea or the Comp/Thumbnail

Comps? I thought that was an art school thing? You mean I have to do those to paint portraits? We don't just set a model up and paint? I just want to paint the face, but can't think of a background? Hands? No way, I just do faces, and clothing is tough, I paint that really loose and abstract-that's in style, I can do it too...

Does the above paragraph sound confusing? This is the naïve artist embarking on a career in painting faces....but will rarely if ever survive in the Portrait market. The idea of being a working portrait painter is a fantastic idea if you know what you are doing (skill) AND you have something to say (concept/idea). What we say is not a technique, not a painting style, but something from the gut and technique might enhance this Idea, or vision we have about who we paint. Surprisingly, using psychology and the emotional response to shapes and tones, we can pin point a close resemblance to what we are looking for, or why it didn't work in our pictures in a very basic way. The basic shapes, and the associated values, as well as the color assembly on a primitive level are keys that draw us into the picture, based upon emotional responses. Primitive art is accessible not because of the details and the formal rules and training which it totally lacks, but because on a simple, basic level, we can register with what has been depicted.

First, we need an idea, a concept of who we are painting, more than knowing we are commissioned to record said face. The idea is born from inspiration from within, either inspired by the sitter, the history we know of the sitter, or, if we don't know them, what we can draw from the visual stimuli the image field creates in front of us. Technicians do not consider this shape very often, as it has no technique to make it go, it's subjective formed from objectivity. This step requires taking a deep and considerate look at ourselves first, and what makes us move, in any way, positive, negative, spiritually, whatever the cause for motivation from within. How do we get this out of our brain, this concept stuff? Thumbnails are a place to begin as well as writing down the thoughts in your mind to move forward solidifying the abstract into visual. Once out in front of us, then we can scrutinize this stuff all we want, and find what makes it tick visually, or more objectively now with visual representation.

If we are looking for happy, joyful, positive attributes, then upright shapes or forms that take on an upright appearance might be the right visual cues. Also, less contrast in values and brighter coloration will help create a positive mood and more pleasing. If we slump the shapes over, give them a subtle curve (and where we curve the line is important, as it will imply turn of direction or form, wilt, rise, etc.) draw the forms with these sagging lines and the picture takes on a negative tone, or somber, gloomy. If the shapes are bursting in all directions, radiation is the art term, the picture feels alive, moving, blowing outward, magnetic, etc. And the colors should have a bit more bite to them, more punch in luminosity and saturation, and more contrast in the value structure. These are examples of what we might be looking for in character but depicted through design. We should feel something within the design, if not, the thumbnails might not contain the right artistic principles that is, shape, value, contrast/color, or are mismatched in concepts, or ill composed for lack of concept at all.

We design pictures using these three elements-

1. Line

2. Shape

3. Form

-this means that detail and rendering are not included here, in fact we don't have to know how to do them to generate ideas. With just these few simple tools to start our ideas, the thumbnail stage should be less intimidating to try.

Lines are the spatial divide space. Within the lines values tone the spaces, creating shapes. More carefully modeled with additional values, form is made visible. We start with the values flat and simple, this helps to recognize the shapes overall spatial volume and how the shapes designed together are composed. Form helps us see what comes forward and goes back in space, changing the context of what we are designing from 2Dimensional simple to 3Dimensional complex.

The thumbnail is not fixed to a purchased canvas size. Let the thumbnail be an organic process of learning about the contents within the frame. If the thumbnail is designed well within an odd framing scale, where we have to create the canvas, don't sacrifice the objective because we don't want to "make" the canvas and prefer to store buy. If this is the case and making a canvas is not practical, design to standard ratios 3:5, 3:4, 1:2 etc . These ratios are what the standardized canvases are cut from. If a contest or a gallery requires a minimum and maximum scale, or also require a specific framer, the conditions may very well end up fixed. That does not mean the idea is stifled completely, we just have to be more inventive with how we work through standard conditions to still give uniqueness to our canvases. Learn to make canvases or have someone make them for you when you have a truly great idea that is generated within an obscure scale, don't sacrifice the idea to self imposed limitations, i.e. I have to make it standard, etc.



For the image I will be doing as an example, I am composing a self portrait. What I want to say about the sitter are as follows; inquisitive, an avid learner, optimistic....this painting is about the painter more than who he is in relation to others, or an introspective painting. The pictorial ideas will start with primitive or tangible concepts. This is the literal or surface qualities that we can immediately relate to. At the deeper level, there

will be expression, gesture, token items or symbolic items, etc. that must also be taken into consideration, but we will introduce those in the next step of the painting process.

I detailed the concepts further than I usually would so I had so point of reference to describe my concepts of the pictures. Examples 1 and 2 are shape and value only, describing a simple mood through two tones. 1 is somber, 2 feels a bit arrogant. Why? The shapes and the values in contrast and form design describe a symbolic event/occurrence we can immediately relate to.

So these thumbnails, on a fundamental level should “feel”, optimistic, and inquisitive. This can be described in the contour/shape I design myself in; translated, this would be my action I am depicted in. If this shape is clearly defined with no details I have half the picture solved. My hope is that when I place subtlety back into the image I don't lose the simple concept that works so well as “SIMPLE”. In thumb 3, while the concept with detail is the sitter working away, and with symbols of night-“working hard”, Rembrandt painting on the left of sitter-“inspiration”, and on the right the window-“into the unknown”, and it being dark is significant, the study in the window-“learning the craft”, the stack of books of artists studied...all these elements do not help the picture become optimistic as the basic engagement with the idea is that of boredom, sleepy, somber, etc. because the values and shapes make it appear this way.

Next, do the tonal values reflect optimism or do they exude a different ideal? The tones are a big part of the mood, this means that I have solve the background in addition to the figure in my sketches if the values are going to work as a whole. I cannot avoid the problem of background design, it is a part of the whole. Sketch number 4 is simple, the values are not too dramatic, yet the all over value plan is too “middle-value”, and the shapes are sagging or drooping. This image is not the correct direction to take.

Images 5 – 9 details are as follows: “Books”, for knowledge, “Mirrors” for reflection and curiosity, “sketches” of hands and various faces for practice and engaging the subject thoroughly,” the easel, palette and brushes” for craft, “the book store” and “antique stores” to show curiosity, inquisitive,” light from above” or “outside” to show illumination or optimism, “night” for the seriousness of the labor for improvement, “head tipped” slightly out of curiosity.

Which of these images will I decide upon? I will cover that, the color comps, and what details I have to do before prepping the final canvas in the next installment. These images were created on the computer using a program called Photoshop, a digital pen and a draw screen, basically digitally sketching. I used the computer for the drawings because the values read simple, flat, and are easy to print, the read is stronger than with pencils scanned, and ideas can be generated any way possible. We will be going back to the traditional mediums in the next installment. Consider this an introduction to the benefits of the computer for traditional artists besides calendar, email and invoicing.

One last side note: how does this thumbnailing apply when I go to a class, workshop group or friends sit for me for the afternoon because I begged them to so I can paint? In the moment of alla prima painting, latch onto the color scheme, the details of jewelry vs.

simple forms of the skin tones and clothing, the way the light is creating interesting patterns of dark, and make the darks clearly patterned and contrasty enough to enjoy viewing, look for the hidden color passages light plays on the surfaces, and look for them as shapes, values, forms, lines, etc. work out your inspiration in a little thumbnail sketch before laying paint to surface and it will save hours of grief of an badly composed canvas. Turn the sitting into a problem to solve rather than another boring face like “the one I painted last week”, or a technique turning sour with lack of inspiration. Enjoy learning and you will never be bored with anything you paint, no matter how against painting it you may first be...happy painting.

Ron Lemen

Studio 2nd Street

studio2ndstreet.com

studio2ndstreet@yahoo.com