

HOW TO OIL PAINT A PORTRAIT

Alla Prima Step-by-Step

From Life ■ Wet-On-Wet ■ In One Sitting

by Don Stewart

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Welcome to Your
"HOW TO OIL PAINT A PORTRAIT - Alla Prima"
Video Companion

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**Today I'm
painting
alla prima.**

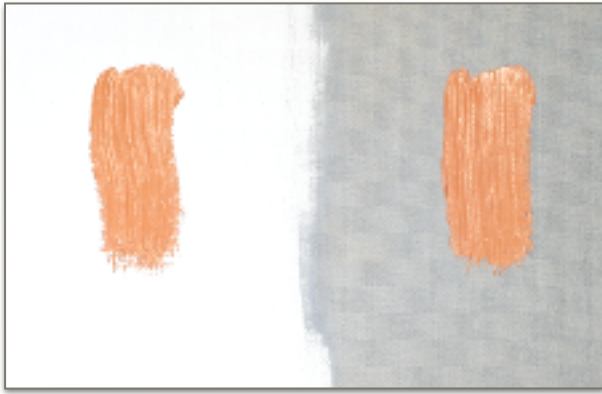


Nightingale, 2011, oil, 12 x 16

Alla Prima basically means from life, wet on wet, in one sitting. This is the finished portrait and I'll show you, step-by-step, how I did it.

I'll also expand on the definition of alla prima. So, stay tuned for that.

Our subject today (well, today for you, but I actually painted this portrait in 2011) is my Mom. And, yes. I call my mother, *Mom*. She had me when she was thirty-nine years old. She lived to be ninety-two.



STEP 1: Tone the Canvas

I've already toned this canvas and it's dry.

I mixed burnt umber with ultramarine blue to get this mid-value, neutral gray, which works well with a portrait.

I like to start with a toned canvas because it's easier to judge value and color.

For example, see how dark this flesh color looks against the white? Now look at the toned side. It's really not that dark.

STEP 2: Warm Up

What you see me doing here first is kind of liven up the canvas with some movement.

I just spread out a little medium, which, I'm using a mixture of 1 part stand oil and 2 parts odorless mineral spirits. It doesn't take a lot.



And, this was kind of a warm up. But at the same time, it got this first application of paint here, to sort of glide and flow on the canvas.



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STEP 3: Underpainting

I'm starting this portrait a traditional way — with an underpainting. Also called an *grisaille* (*gris* means gray in French).

In this case I'm using thinned paint, so it's a transparent underpainting. And it's monochromatic, which means I'm only using one color.

Earth tones work best for an underpainting because they have less oil content and they dry quicker. So, today I'm using burnt umber thinned with odorless mineral spirits and a little bit of medium.

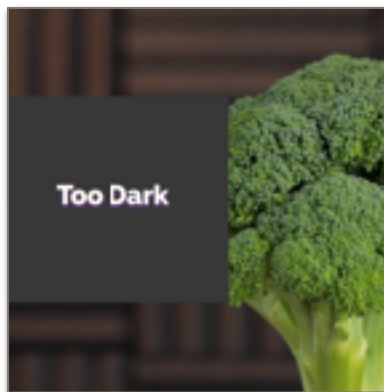
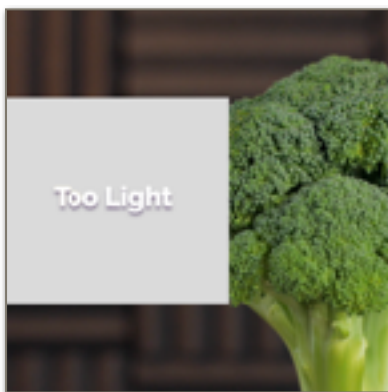
Starting this way, with a transparent, monochromatic underpainting has its benefits.

Underpainting Benefits

1. First of all, I can check the composition and design of my portrait while it's still easy to make changes. For example, in this step of today's portrait I realized that I wanted Mom to be a little bigger on the canvas. So, I wiped everything off and started again.

2. A second benefit to starting this way, with a *monochromatic* underpainting, is that it allows me to focus on value relationships right from the start.

And getting a color's value, in other words its relative lightness or darkness, to be right, is even more important than getting the color right.



3. The third, and final benefit, is that by starting with an underpainting, and I'm basically using the underpainting as a block-in, I'm able to think in terms of shapes and masses instead of details.

That's also why I'm using a bigger bristle brush right now. To help me stay away from the details, and save them for later.



Sighting

Now, just because I'm thinking in terms of shapes and masses, it doesn't mean that I'm not being accurate with them.

In fact, here I am "sighting," or measuring to help me *be* accurate.

It looks like the width of Mom's head is the same as the distance from the top of her head to her mouth.

So, I apply that measurement to the blocked-in underpainting and get the position of her mouth just right (I explain sighting more in other videos).

Composition and Design

As I keep working here on the underpainting...

And yes, I know it looks horrible at this point. It's a block-in. Remember, shapes and masses.

...I continue to figure out what my composition and design is going to be.

Usually a portrait is in a vertical format. But, I'm trying out a horizontal format today. Which is fine. I just need to use that horizontal space in a good way.



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STEP 4: Underpainting Accuracy

At this point I've finished the block-in part of the underpainting. And I've already started shaping those masses and being a little more precise and accurate with everything.

I've been double-checking proportions, angles and feature placement again, by sighting. And, I've started using the smaller brushes.

Here I'm using a smaller bristle brush and burnt umber to refine the dark areas.



And I do that in combination with wiping out the light areas.

For the light areas I can use a small, stiff bristle brush. Or a cotton swab. Even a paper towel.

And they can be used dry or dipped in a little odorless mineral spirits.

It's a subtractive process. Almost like adding white, or using an eraser.

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STEP 5: Mass in Color

Once I'm satisfied that everything is in the correct place and in the correct value, I can consider the underpainting done. And now, I'm free to give all of my attention to color.

I go back to using bigger bristle brushes at first. The biggest I can get away with. Just to mass in the color and get the positioning down.

Later I'll begin to use smaller and smaller brushes to manipulate the paint and render details.



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I start with a skin tone mixture that's a middle value. I lay that in to see what it looks like.

Good enough for now. So, I begin working that mixture into the larger areas.

Here, just like in the block-in, I try to place the paint accurately. This way, I avoid having to re-work and make corrections later.

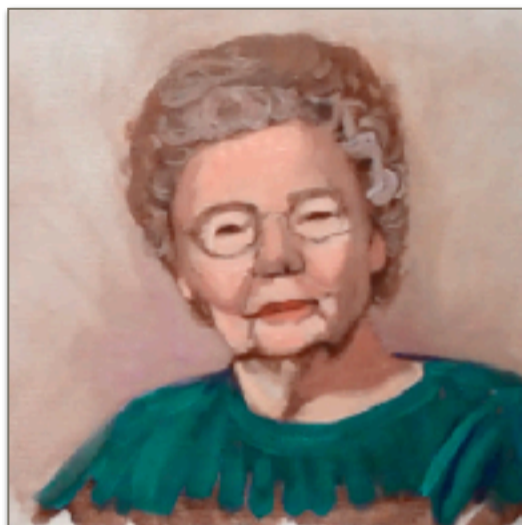


After all of the skin tone is down, I'll move onto the hair, the shirt, and finally the background.

I usually paint the background first. Because, it just makes sense to put foreground elements on top.

But since I'm working alla prima, or wet on wet, I can blend the foreground and the background if I need to, and make it work.

For Mom's cheeks, I'm using a skin tone that's a little more rosy. And, I'll do the same for her nose and ears, too.



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STEP 6: Color Development

Once I have the shirt, background and skin tones — *fleshed out* (see what I did there?), it's time to develop the color more.

Like I already said, starting with an underpainting is a very traditional way to work. And, so is what I've done here with the color.

I've worked all around the canvas and put color everywhere, as opposed to just working one section at a time.

Which isn't wrong. But, by putting color everywhere, I can understand and calibrate the color better by making comparisons.



Now it's time to start using smaller brushes and render details. So, I go back to the skin tones to start adding some variations.

The very first thing I do is put down a highlight. Sometimes I save highlights for last, but I'm putting it down here as a value marker.

Now I know that my middle values should not get that light.

I also added a dark value marker, earlier, and that helps me judge middle values, too.

Did You Know?

- 17th century Flemish painter, Frans Hals is credited with being the first notable Alla Prima painter
- The Alla Prima technique was popularized in the mid-19th century by the impressionists

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More About Alla Prima

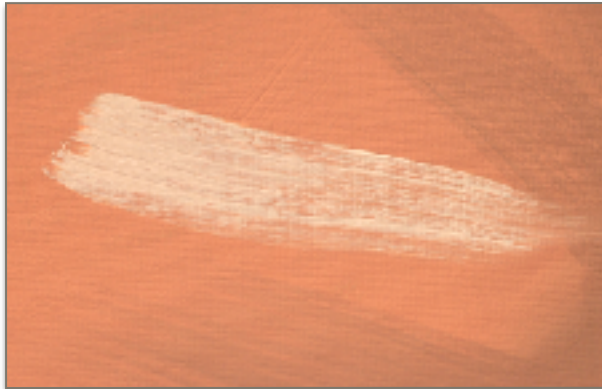
Okay, so I'm using an Alla Prima technique here. But, what does *alla prima* mean, exactly?

The term, *alla prima* is Italian for “at the first.” In French it's called *au premier coup*, which means “at first stroke.” It's also commonly referred to as “wet-on-wet” or Direct Painting.

So, Alla Prima, Au Premier Coup, Wet-On-Wet, Direct Painting — they all pretty much refer to the same thing: A wet on wet technique which allows us to complete a painting, either in one sitting or in a single session. And almost always from life.

Now, a painting session could last for days, and in that case the key would be to keep the paint wet and moveable for those days. Mom's portrait, I finish in a single day.

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Expressive Brush Strokes

I should also mention that one feature of a traditional *alla prima* painting is a spontaneous look and lively, expressive brushstrokes. So, I'm trying to give my strokes some life and energy.

One way I do that is by putting down a good amount of paint with my brush and then pulling it away. And up at the very end of the

stroke. The pulling up gives it kind of a tail. Like a comet. So, that gives it a direction and intention.

But, I don't do this at the expense of the form. And, I don't have to liven up my strokes this way. My main objective, as always, is to paint what I see correctly. And that can be done with clever brushwork or not.

Work at a Comfortable Pace

Painting what I see correctly might require me to work at a slow pace, too.

People tend to think that an *Alla Prima* painting has to all be done fast. But, I like to work at a pace which feels comfortable for the section I'm working on. Some parts I do quickly, while other parts need more time.



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STEP 7: Color Refinement

In the final step I make further refinements in mom's face to capture her appearance and add dimension to the shape of her head.

I also look around at all of the edges and concentrate on getting those right. Keeping the edges hard where the form turns sharply, like it does under mom's chin. And softening the edges where the form turns softly, as it does on her forehead.

Also, in this step I look at the shadow areas for any reflected light and color. But, at the same time, I'm also careful not to place too much importance on the shadow areas.

All that's left then are the tiniest details. Like the highlight on the tip of mom's nose and highlights in her eyes.



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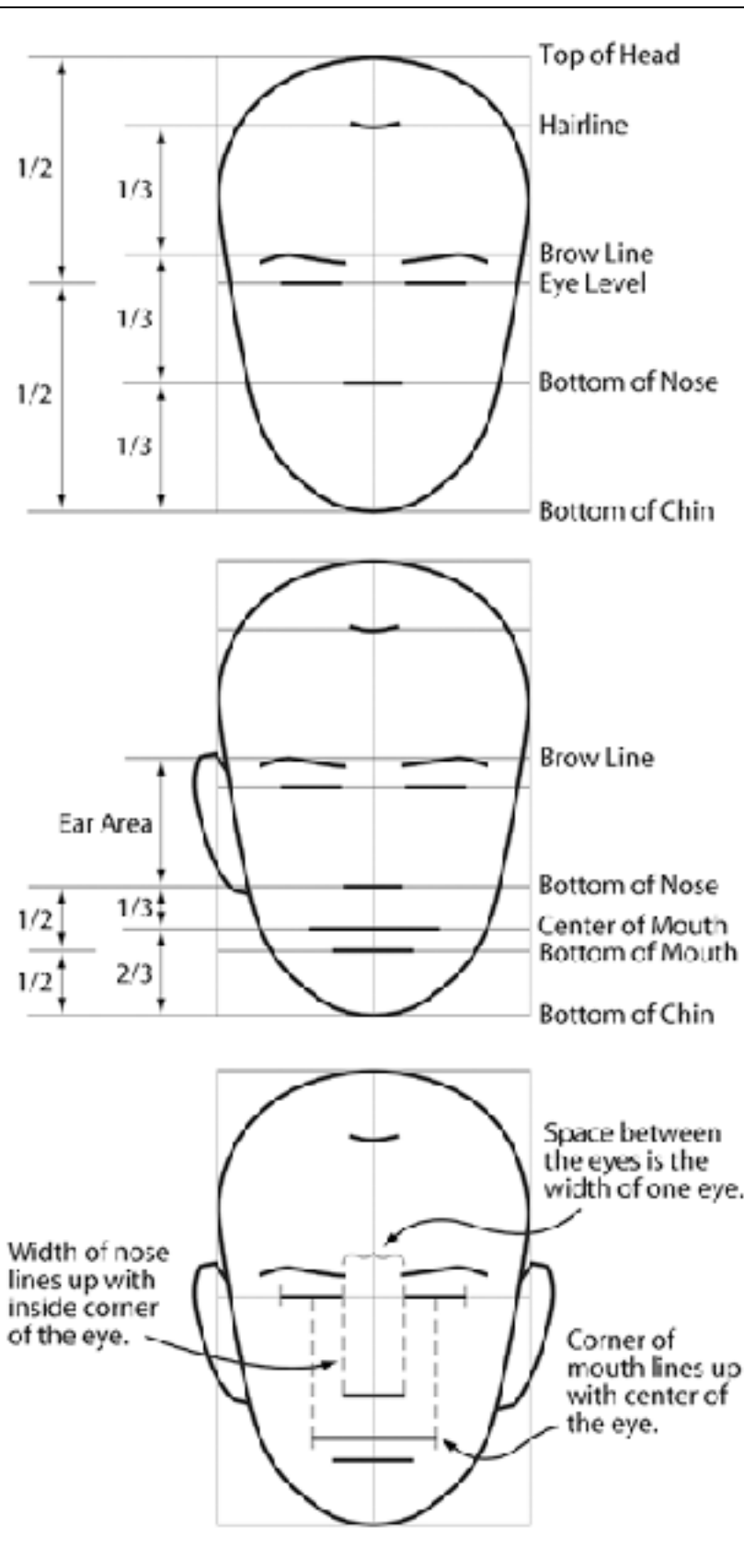
Bonus: General Head Proportions

Here's a diagram that I put together for you.

I use these general proportions as a starting point for facial feature placement.

But, this is just a general guideline. In reality everyone's head and features are proportioned differently.

So, I note where my subject differs and paint accordingly.



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