WATERCOLOUR PORTRAITURE – NOTES TO HELP

1. Choose the right photograph! A portrait can never work of Auntie Mildred if she's third from the left in a group shot; or if she's a blurry part of a 5x7; or if she's been taken by a professional photographer in a studio. The latter might surprise you, but photographers take out the shine and shadow from a face to make you look better, but it's the end for a watercolour. You want a clear, very high definition photograph, large as possible with lots of light and shade.

2. Never underestimate the importance of good drawing. A poor drawing can only ever result in a poor painting. Tracing is an ideal way to learn, but without understanding you will make mistakes. Look at anatomy and particularly the way the eyes, ears, nose and mouth work. Constantly trace and then try to draw freehand.

3. Gridding is useful, but can still lead to mistakes without knowledge and understanding.

4. Identify how you are going to approach the painting and what you are going to do for the background etc. Don't leave that till the end! And make sure you have a stretched board ready – you can't paint a proper portrait on unstretched paper (unless it is 300lb – nb 140lb is standard).

5. Do you know your transparent colours? You should do. Sticking to mostly transparent colours will keep the painting fresh, too many opaque colours like the cadmiums will dirty and muddy the colour washes.

6. Play around with colours for flesh. All are a mix of red, yellow and blue. This is why some browns thinned right down work well; brown is just a combination of red, yellow and blue. The only danger with using a ready made flesh colour like that is it could be opaque. It's just a question of what quantities, what colours and where.

7. Look for the lightest areas on the face. Are they white? If not, then that is the colour of your first wash. If they are white, then look for the next lightest and paint everywhere except the white areas.

8. Now it's just a question of blocking in large areas of colour and tone, working as you would normally work in a watercolour (ie the final details and smallest darkest shadows will be the very last thing you put in). You can work wet in wet and wet in dry. I tend to do both, so put as much as I can while wet, then let it dry. Remember that watercolours are pretty well fixed when dry and you can do a lot of wet work on each layer without disturbing what is underneath.

9. Add the hair and clothing (if seen) at a mid point. It helps to sort out flesh tones.

10. Even if you are not bothered about a likeness, take a step back from the painting frequently. Put it on a shelf (with the photograph you are working from) and take at least 10 steps back. Be critical. Ask family or friends to be critical – they may not know about art, but they can still see if something is not right, often something you have grown blind to.

11. I like to put my backgrounds in last of all, but I always have an idea of what it will be. Don't second guess or leave it to chance – you could ruin a perfectly good portrait that way.

12. Never be afraid to tear it up and start again. Too many amateur artists become precious about their work (they know how much the paper cost!) and work something to death even though it died long ago.

Quick list of materials I use

Nearly all of these are from Jacksons Online.

Paints:

Holbein Watercolours – favourite colours to use for portraits are Brown Madder (discontinued so now buy Perylene Maroon), Mars Violet, Raw Umber, Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine, Van Dyke Brown and Paynes Grey.

Brushes:

Isabey Kolinsky Sable. Most used sizes would be 3, 6 and 8.

Paper:

Either Saunders Waterford rough or NOT watercolour board or Arches or Fabriano Artistico.