

Older= Better—Winners of our Over 60 Competition

the Artist's magazine

Controlling
Water in
Watercolor

Painting Fire & Its Aftermath

Inside a
Portrait Class
on Color

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River Valley, Papoose Fire (detail, acrylic on gold gessoed Aquabond, 17¼x17¼) by Stephen Quiller



In a recent workshop in New Jersey, **Lea Colie Wight** explained the principles of painting the portrait in color, as taught in the Studio Incamminati School for Contemporary Realist Art.

BY LOUISE B. HAFESH

COLOR CURRICULUM



OPPOSITE: "Painting from life in daylight can be challenging because the light key varies with atmospheric changes," says Wight. "Establishing color relationships early in your work helps. One strategy is to find a subtle color, easily influenced by the light, such as the white bricks in *Duet* (oil on linen, 42x28), and then create a color note that sets the key for other colors. As the light changes, you can check color relationships against your established color note."

courtesy Haynes Galleries

IN 2002, WHEN RENOWNED portrait painter and instructor Nelson Shanks cofounded Studio Incamminati, in Philadelphia, with his wife and fellow artist, Leona Shanks, the contemporary realist art community applauded en masse. For some time prior, traditional academic training had been out of vogue and, while a limited resurgence was gaining momentum, many art schools and universities had yet to include a classical course of study.

Shanks saw a growing need for a modern-day atelier that followed a skills-based, professional curriculum. His solution, Studio Incamminati School for Contemporary Realist Art, today considered one of the top classical art schools in the United States, offers an intensive, full-time core curriculum that includes instruction that progresses from basic drawing skills to advanced methods of tradition-based realist art. Also, in a continuing effort to broaden its reach and serve those artists who, due to financial or geographical constraints, cannot study at Incamminati's Philadelphia home base, the school brings its renowned instructors and workshops to other like-minded ateliers in a program called "In Your Town Workshops."

Incamminati on Location

One three-day In Your Town Workshop offering, The Portrait in Color, recently took place in my neck of the woods (midway between New York City and Philadelphia) at Martinsville Studio in Bridgewater, N.J. as part of owner Jamie Dzuris Lindholm's studio-intensive visiting artist curriculum. Conducted by Incamminati graduate and teaching fellow Lea Colie Wight, the workshop presented a rare opportunity to study with a leading figurative and still life artist who works within the colorist tradition. I quickly signed on.

Energetic Gesture Drawing

"I think one of the most helpful working habits an artist can have is to begin with the largest statement you can make about something, whether it's expressed in gesture and shape, color, or value," said Wight as she began staging the model on the first day. "Working progressively from large to small forces you to edit and results in a strong, foundational understanding upon which you can build."

We watched Wight put her teaching to practice as she deftly began a gesture



Materials

Surface:

Claessens #13 oil-primed linen

Oils: Vasari

Classic Artists' Oil Colors and **Natural Pigments** Rublev Colours

Colors:

burnt sienna, burnt umber, yellow ochre, alizarin crimson permanent, permanent rose, cadmium red deep, cadmium red medium, cadmium red light, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium yellow medium or cadmium scarlet, nickel yellow or lemon yellow, Indian yellow, viridian green, phthalo green, phthalo turquoise, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, French ultramarine blue, dioxazine purple, magenta, cobalt violet, Old Holland Schevenings violet, flake white, titanium white

Mediums:

Gamblin stand oil, **Natural Pigments** Rublev Colours Oleogel and Italian Varnish

Palette: **New Wave Art** Posh

Brushes:

Silver Brush hog bristle filberts, sizes 2–8; **Rosemary & Co** Masters Choice series 278 long filberts



demonstration with a mixture of burnt sienna, French ultramarine blue and titanium white on a canvas. “The goal in gesture drawing is swiftly to capture the main energetic movements of the pose,” she said, while anchoring anatomical landmarks on her canvas to establish pivotal points, like the tilt of the head and angle of the shoulder mass. “Try to see and render the figure in the simplest way, with energy and freedom; express its essence by limiting yourself to a few lines and angles.” (See Wight’s gesture study, page 35.) She stressed that we weren’t to rush at this early stage but rather, to take as much time as needed with the drawing.

ABOVE: “Color awareness is key to showing the figure in cool, window light set against the warmer colors of a deep interior, as seen in *Self Portrait - So Far* (oil on linen, 30x24),” says Wight. “Workshop exercises done in strong colors develop the color awareness needed to express subtle color differences seen in natural light.”

Our first exercises involved a series of two- and five-minute model poses from which we created loose gesture outlines. Wight next gave us the go-ahead to build on these outlines, and we began adding information, establishing proportions and fine-tuning our compositions by roughing in the shadow shapes (using

RIGHT: Wight explained that a **gesture study** establishes the building blocks of a portrait or figure painting. The goal is to determine the key points and angles of the pose while rendering the subject as simply and freely as possible.

our initial color mixtures) and then wiping out those areas where the light hit the figure. “Work rapidly and carefully, addressing the largest statement before making smaller distinctions,” Wight said. “Then, periodically stand back, scan and squint to eliminate distracting details.” A quick glance around the room showed remarkable progress in students’ works as gesture drawings began taking form, appearing almost sculptural.

Study in Simplified Color

At midafternoon Wight introduced another valuable aid—a simple color study, which would serve as a working guide for a full-color portrait (see Wight’s color study, at right). “We all have preconceived ideas about the tonal value and color of something,” she said—and then pointed out the danger of misconceptions: “If the value relationships are wrong, the color relationships can’t possibly be right. In reality, color is different from the ‘dye lot’ color of something. Because we’re trying to recreate three-dimensional reality with paint on a flat surface, color has to be revealed through its proximity and relationship to the colors around it and is dependent on the color of the light source.”

Wight coached students to make strong, simplified color statements by laying in flat blocks of color to represent each major mass in light and in shadow. We began with the mass that was easiest to see—often one in the background. “This massing of color helps establish the key (value relationships) of the painting and helps you understand the main skin color of the model,” said Wight as she moved from easel to easel, sharing insights: “Values are recognized by squinting at both the object you’re painting and your painting,” she said at one point and later advised, “When judging color, keep your eyes wide open; glance from one color to another and compare. Ask yourself, ‘Is it greener, bluer, redder, cooler, warmer, and so forth, than the colors around it?’”

Then, after talking the class through a limited demonstration, the result of which was a beautiful mosaic of color and shapes, Wight gave students time to follow suit.



We’d enjoyed a fruitful day practicing new techniques, but the best was yet to come when Wight treated us to a three-hour, evening portrait demo. (See *One Evening Working Large to Small*, page 34). Suffice to say, watching Wight work her magic, implementing what she’d taught us, ended the day’s instruction on a high note.

A Portrait in Color

Wight kicked off day two with a second model and an opportunity to put newfound skills to the test. She guided us back through the process we’d learned the previous day, starting with a preliminary gesture drawing. “Be bold. A weak or unfocused opening can undermine the rest of

Text continued on page 36

ABOVE: For her **color study**, Wight purposely avoided focusing on the drawing; instead she directed her attention to the comparison of large color statements. An artist could continue to develop the painting from this point, but this particular color study was a class demonstration that Wight wouldn’t finish.

One Evening Working Large to Small

BY LEA COLIE WIGHT



1. Visualize the composition: I take a few moments to visualize my painting on the canvas. This step of seeing the whole composition in my head creates a proportional awareness that makes my initial gesture drawing more accurate and comprehensive. I had set up my model with strong color notes in the composition since color study was the focus of the workshop.

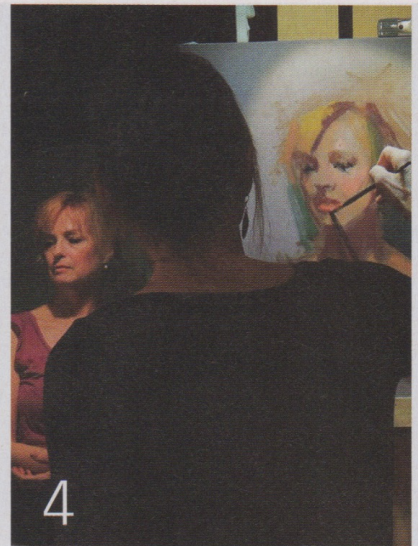
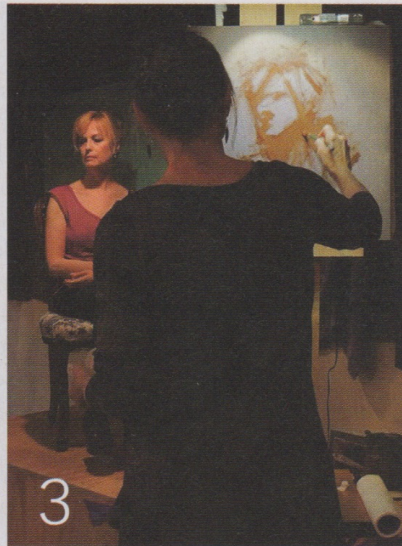
2. Initial gesture drawing: At all stages, I work from major to minor; for the early gestural strokes, I look for major directional lines and angles. I'm not locked into anything at this stage. All my lines are open ended because the intersections will move as I develop my painting and make the proportions more accurate.

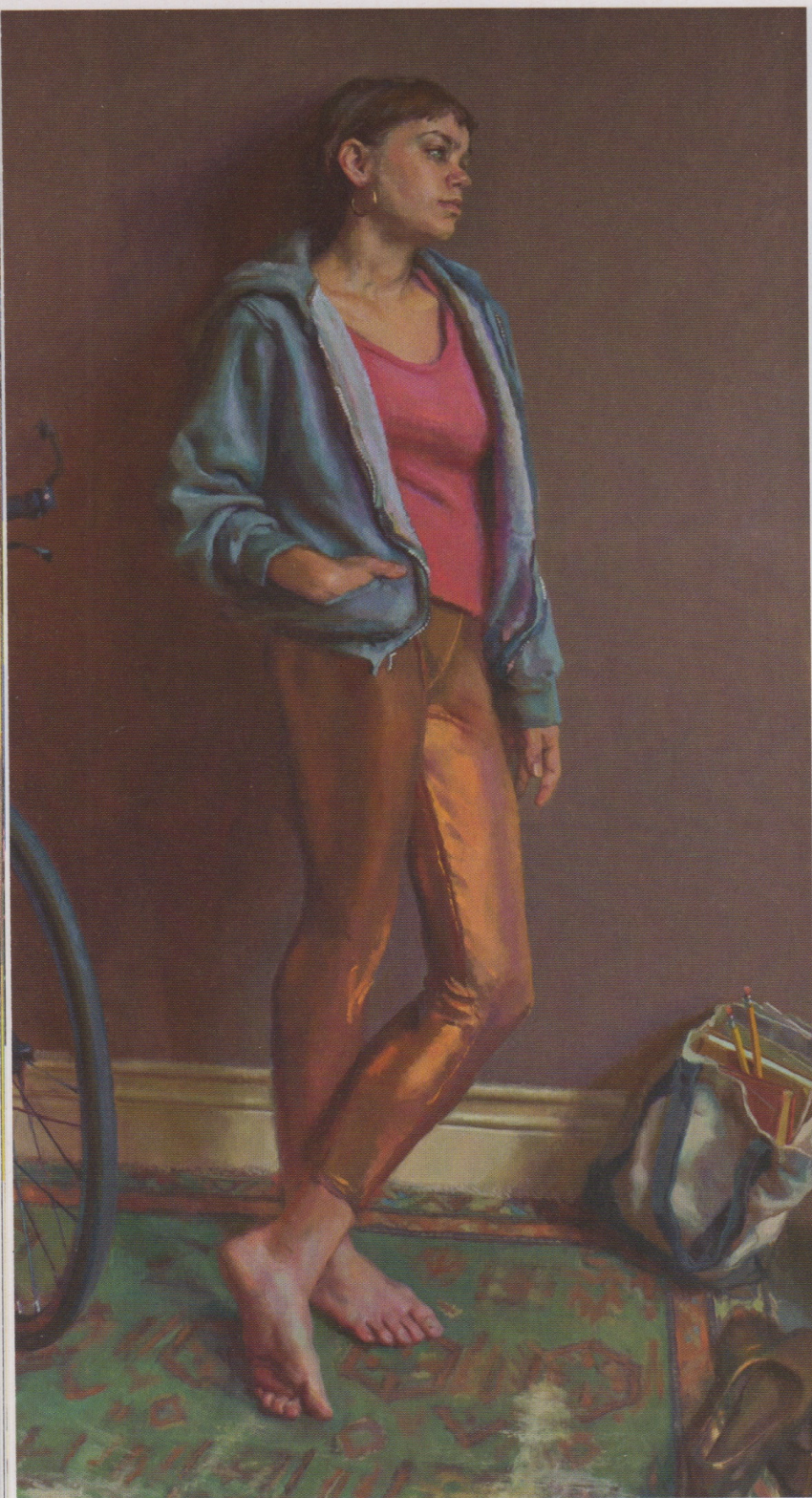
3. Shadow shapes: Squinting at my model, I mass in the major shadow shapes. At this stage I'm shifting my awareness rapidly as I ask the following questions: Is my gesture drawing still accurate? Do the flat abstract shapes appear accurate when I squint my eyes? Are the abstract shapes beginning to support accurate three-dimensional form? I develop this grisaille (drawing in monochrome) until I'm confident about my proportions and the major anatomical forms. I add second, darker accents as needed to define some of the shadow shapes.

4. Major color notes: Here you see my first color pass. I'm going after the obvious major color notes in the composition to help me determine the more

complex skin tones. The first notes are approximations, leaning toward overstatement. I'll adjust these notes as the painting progresses, but I establish the highlight on the subject's forehead as a test for my value scale. Working with a bright, artificial light on my canvas, I find this step is necessary to determine the value range. Once I have a working color on my brush, I focus on form and the adjustment of shapes.

5. Large statements in place: I'm a firm believer in getting the initial large statements in place and working from that platform, and that's what I did, even though I was limited to one evening with the model. I'd have loved to be able to work longer on this painting and to show the next stage of development.





ABOVE: "Color-handling skills developed over many studies can open the door to any color situation," says Wight. "My motivation for painting **Lauren M** (oil on linen, 46x26) was the challenge of replicating the model's copper-colored pants."

courtesy Haynes Galleries

Text continued from page 33

the painting," she advised. "Beginning a painting is like falling in love before the real work of life begins. Like a long marriage, the later stages are beautiful and deeply moving, but they take work and focus. At the early stage, work rapidly and carefully, always thinking of main masses, not detail. Above all, remember that each bit of information, whether expressed in angles, proportion, value or color, only exists in relation to another piece of information. Painting is all about comparison."

Throughout days two and three, Wight encouraged us to work at our own pace and address each stage as thoroughly as possible: "Don't move on until you've worked out your proportions in the early stages, and your values and color relationships in the initial block-in." (See Wight determine the shadow mass, below.)

As we moved well into our days of painting, Wight gave individualized guidance at each student's easel and instructive comments for the benefit of all. "Work at responding to the information spontaneously, while at the same time trying to be as accurate as possible," she told one student. Later, to clarify a point to the entire class, she said, "When going after the reflected light, view the object or face that you're painting through half-closed eyelids. How evident is the light? Then, keeping your eyelids half closed, view your painting. Does that area of reflected light jump out? If it does, then you've made the value too light."



ABOVE: As students worked on their paintings during days two and three of the workshop, Wight pointed out that it's sometimes difficult to **determine the shadow mass** in an area where the local color is dark, for instance, the model's hair. To settle the question, Wight held a paintbrush over the model. "If the brush casts a shadow," she said, "the area is in the light."



ABOVE: "Each instance of 'white' in *Café* (oil on linen, 48x28) is expressed through the differences among those whites," says Wight. "For example, the lid of the coffee cup is a cool, blue white, and the book pages are a warmer white. You must look beyond what you expect to see and open up to what's really in front of you."

courtesy Haynes Galleries

Empowered to Grow

Early on, Wight had set the tone for a calm, supportive workshop by saying, "I find that no lasting progress is made when people feel overly self-conscious and, consequently, fear failing in a group setting." Generous with support, she fostered an environment where participants felt safe experimenting and exploring new techniques. As a result, at the end of the workshop, students not only left with a number of reference studies, but also with a clear process in mind for creating a full-color, direct painting from life.

That achievement came with a sense of empowerment, the confidence to incorporate



Meet Lea Colie Wight

Lea Colie Wight received her bachelor of fine arts degree from Minneapolis College of Art and Design and later studied at Studio Incamminati School for Contemporary Realist Art, where she's now one of the lead teachers. She has also served as a teaching assistant to Nelson Shanks at the Art Students League of New York. She earned Honor Awards in the Portrait Society of America's 2009 and 2010 International Portrait Competition as well as a 2011 Certificate of Excellence. The Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio) gave her an Honor Award in its Inspiring Figures exhibition (2010), and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art (Ind.) included her work in their 2010 and 2012 Contemporary Realism Biennials. Haynes Galleries (Thomaston, Me. And Nashville, Tenn.), Main Street Gallery (Manasquan, N.J.), New Masters Gallery (Carmel, Calif.) and Elliot Yearly Gallery (Aspen, Colo.) represent her work. Visit her website at www.leawight.com.

the lessons we'd learned into our own methods. Along those lines, while handing out an additional wealth of useful back-up resources, Wight summed up her hopes for the workshop: "About 15 years ago I found my way to Studio Incamminati, and I gained the tools that propelled me ahead. My goal in this workshop was to give as much of that foundational information as possible with the idea that I didn't expect you to master a new skill in such a short time span, but rather to come away with an understanding of the information necessary at each stage of painting. I wanted you to participate in exercises aimed at developing each skill and view examples of each step, which you could later practice in your home studios." Mission accomplished! ■

LOUISE B HAFESH is an award-winning artist and writer and a contributing editor for *The Artist's Magazine*. You can see examples of her work at: www.louisebhafesh.com and www.paintersportal.blogspot.com.