

Tip #23

The Why of Self Portraits

As you can tell by the title, this tip is more a "why-to" than a how-to! Do you remember the old joke about the man who asked how to get to Carnegie Hall? The answer was "Practice, man, practice!" That's one of the best reasons for painting a self portrait, too-to keep in practice.



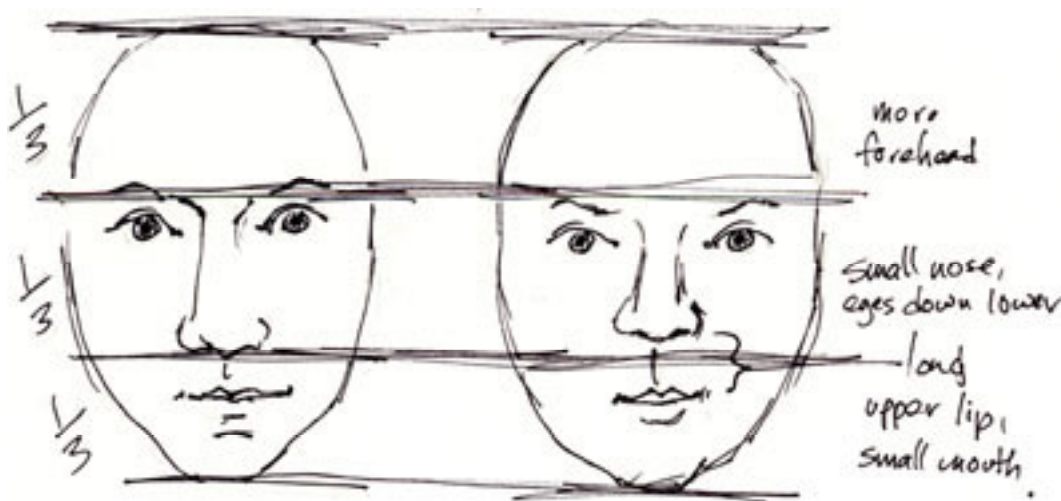
Painting the human face and form is always a challenge-getting a likeness makes it even more so. Whether you paint from life or from a photo, you need a model, because although there's plenty of information out there on classical proportions of the human face, very few of us actually LOOK like that! We all have our little quirks and oddities. As Francis Bacon (1561--1626) wrote, "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." That "strangeness" is what allows us to create a likeness-but again, doing so takes practice. Notice where you differ from "the norm," and focus on those things. (Of course that advice holds true for ANY portrait!)

It's marvelous to be able to hire a model, but often we can't afford one, or we want or need one now, not when the model is actually available. Family members and friends may or may not be willing to pose for us. So what to do? Well, mirrors (and digital cameras!) are a great solution, at least we are always available and willing!

Other reasons to make self portraits are perhaps more interesting, though. Remember Elizabeth "Grandma" Layton? She was encouraged to draw at the age of 68 to deal with her depression, and her self portraits changed her entire life - and made a fascinating body of work. We too can draw in order to get outside of some situation in our lives that leave their tracks on our faces, or what we'd like to see there. We can set ourselves free from our limitations, at least on paper or canvas.

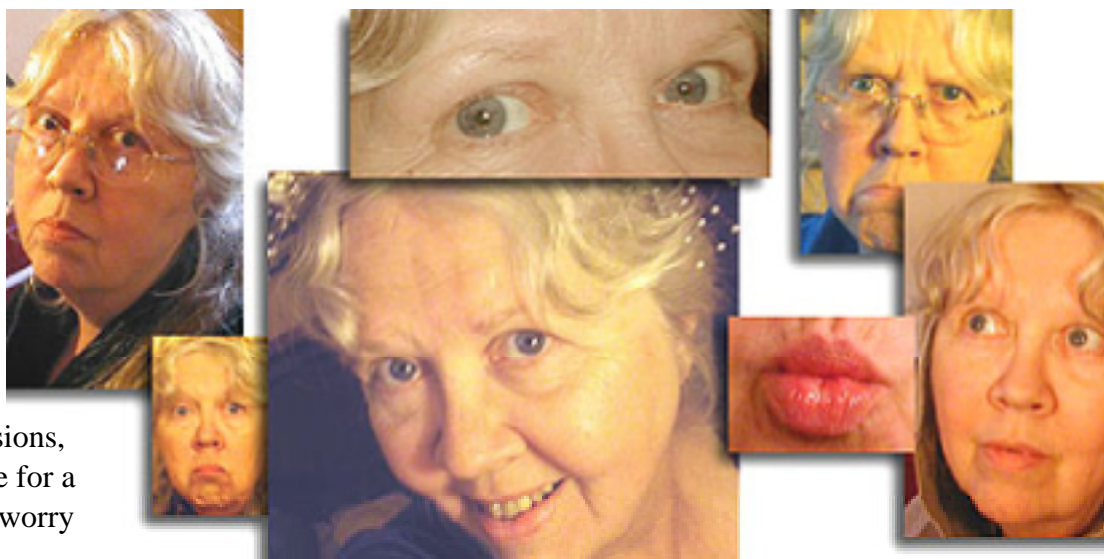
Art 23-1, Proportions, Classical or otherwise

Some say the classical proportions are like those at left, with the beginning of the nose and the tip marking the middle third. In my case, however, my brows are below that third, my nose stops short, and I have a long upper lip-make notes, if you need to, to help you notice these things when doing your own self portrait!



Art 23-2,
Resource material

Take photos of yourself with lots of various expressions, just so you have a reference for a variety of emotions - don't worry about looking good.



Art 23-2



Art 23-3

Art 23-3, Push it, if you like

I may not even try to make it look like me -I'm just the raw material, as in this sketch. There was no attempt at a portrait, per se, just inspiration, pushing features as far as necessary to get the effect I was after!

Art 23-4, Fantasy time!

We can also get playful and imaginative, and do a self portrait as we would like to be. See yourself as a fairy princess, a ragamuffin or a knight - or a gargoyle, as far as that goes! Have fun with it...

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Art 23-4