

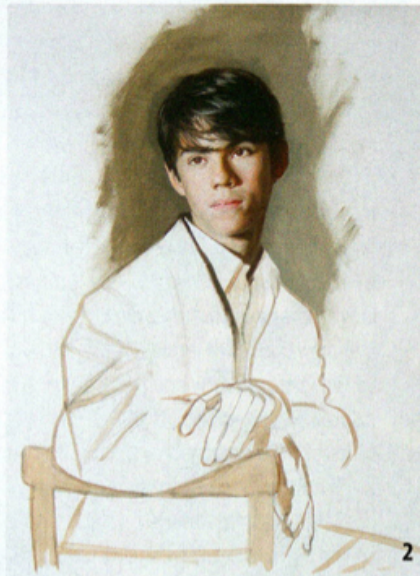
John Seibels Walker

A Classical Academic Approach



My process for staging and painting a portrait begins with something that excites me. With this portrait, I found immediate inspiration when I saw Jonah under the natural light in my north-lit studio. The work of Raphael, Bronzino and Pontormo came to mind as I observed his poetic expression, long graceful fingers and the tilt of his head. I loved the simple drama and limited palette of his favorite black leather jacket over a white shirt, which was both modern and classic.

STAGE 1 I typically begin portraits on an overstretched fine linen canvas I have carefully prepared with four to five coats of gesso. Next, I tone the canvas with a semi-opaque turpentine slush of quick-drying foundation white paint tinted with a little bit of cobalt blue. An oversized canvas gives me the opportunity to crop each painting near or upon completion to what has revealed itself to be the perfect composition. I “inked” in my preliminary drawing with a very thin burnt umber wash as I started into paint, keeping things tonal. I used the head, scaled to life-size, to determine the

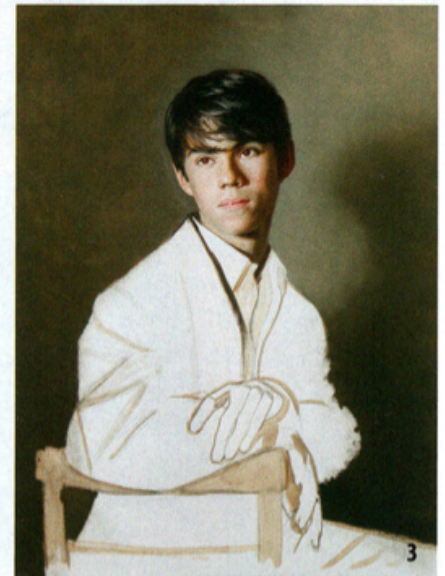


correct proportions for the portrait.

STAGE 2 At this point, I am not overly concerned with my drawing being perfectly accurate. I am mostly thinking in terms of large shapes. I immediately move into establishing the head with solid painting using round and flat bristle brushes and just a little turp added to thin my paint. I chose to use a more limited and earthy palette consisting of yellow ochre, raw sienna, cadmium red, venetian red, indian red, transparent red oxide, burnt umber, raw umber, ivory black and titanium white. I was using yellow ochre, reds and black to capture the lighter flesh passages, with the addition of a bit of umber in the shadow areas.

STAGE 3 I begin focusing on massing in all my relative values, killing the white of the background first, before blocking in the clothing, hands and chair. I will then be able to establish Jonah’s shirt as my whitest white.

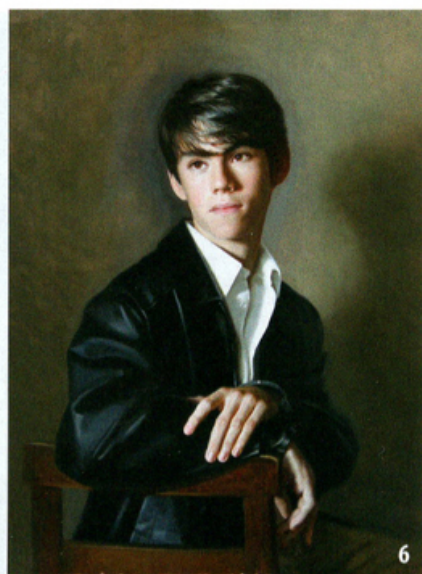
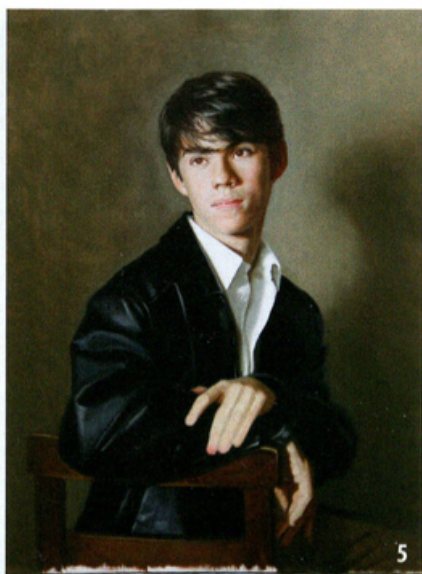
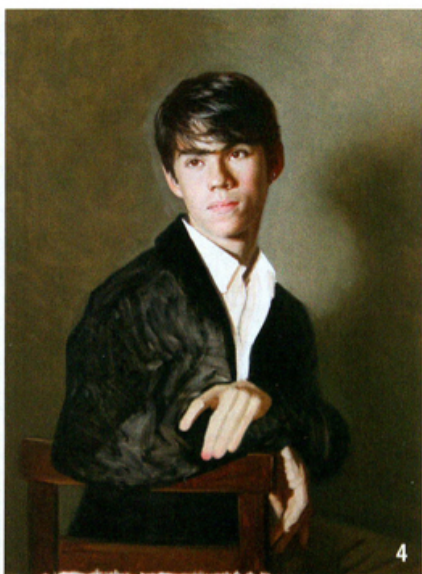
STAGE 4 I continue to think about the general color values and gesture of the entire painting



while I further block things in. At this point my canvas is still overstretched (not shown in my photos in this article), but I begin to see what my final crop and composition will be around this point and I tear off wide strips of white cash register paper tape and use those to mask off what I believe my final crop will be.

STAGE 5 Once my initial lay in is dry, I develop the leather jacket and shirt a bit further. I do this by scumbling general color values back into those passages with bristle brushes using little to no additional medium. I can then proceed with synthetic flats and soft sables to manipulate the paint and draw back into the paint. I next use a large broad filbert bristle to pat and model the paint and, at times, soft fan brushes to soften and gently blend the paint where glare is showing.

STAGE 6 I next make another pass around the head refining and correcting the drawing, expression and finish before developing the hands and giving them form. This stage involves being brave enough to somewhat loose what you have



already found! I adjust the flesh and other passages by using a very classic painting technique: I scumble either a hazy general color value or a semi-opaque white over a passage I want to refine where I can still see the structure of my original lay in. This wets the passage and forces me to see it afresh. I continue to paint very solidly without using too much medium (a 50/50 split of stand or sun-thickened linseed oil with turp). Once my surfaces are more solidly covered and dry, they may become quite matte in appearance. I will, at this point, brush on a thin coat of retouch varnish (a 50/50 split of damar varnish and turp) to revive and seal the surface. I can then paint back over those areas making further adjustments

STAGE 7 *Portrait of Jonah, oil, 32 x 24"*

As I move toward my final adjustments and the final 10 percent, I make another pass over everything still adjusting my drawing while continuing to fine-tune values and edges. With facial expressions, I find that every edge and transition is critical—where the hardness and softness of even a sixteenth of an inch can throw things off! I also finish the background, changing shapes and color values, as needed, to be more harmonious with the figure. My goal is to remain as objective as possible, pushing my eye for all refinements until the subject truly speaks to me and everything works together in complete and perfect harmony.

Walker paints in the tradition of the Grand Mannerist portraitists. He splits his time between his studios in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Lucca, Italy. Earning a degree in studio art, he furthered his studies at the Classical Realist Atelier of Richard Lack. His work can be found in collections around the world and is a much sought-after portraitist. 