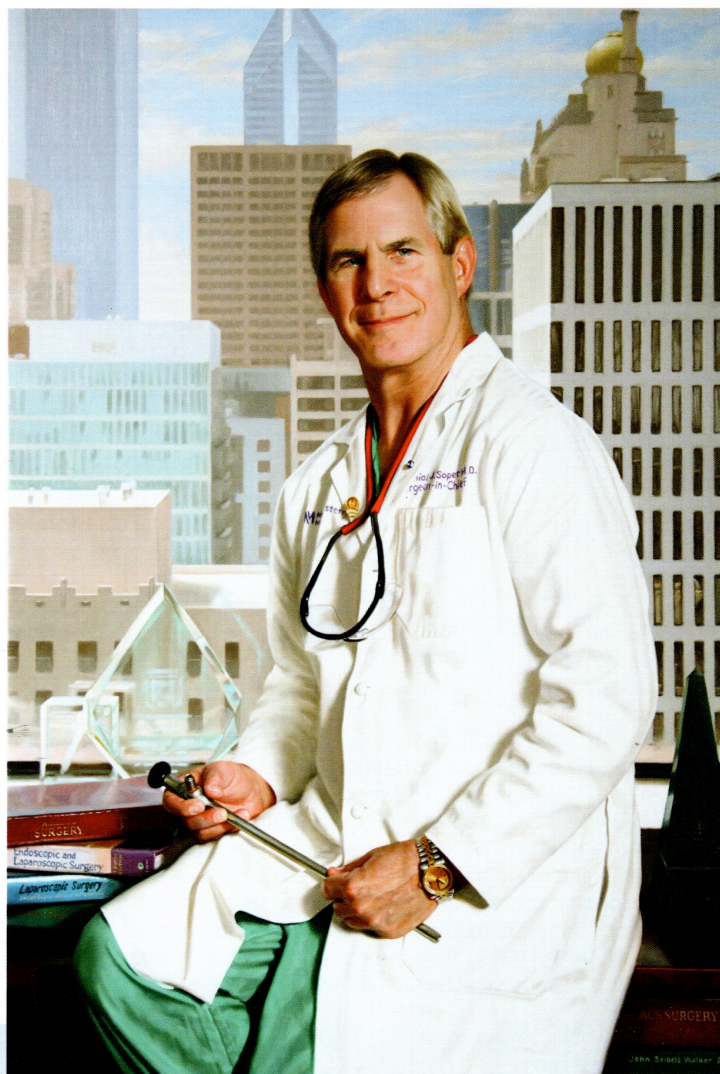
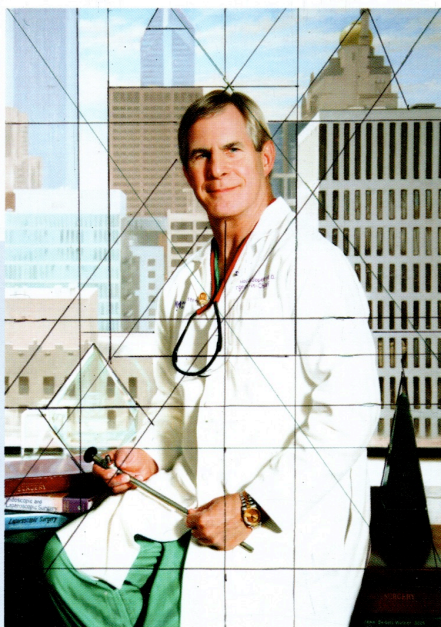


DESIGNING COMPLEX PORTRAIT COMPOSITIONS: FROM SITTING TO SIGNATURE

John Seibels Walker

As a commissioned portrait artist, I am often asked to include a number of varied personal items in a painting that can speak of the sitter's unique interests and individual story. My challenge quickly becomes how to compose a painting where the figure remains the center of interest within complex subject matter and settings. I always try to view this process as an interesting problem-solving journey which begins by putting all of the pieces of a puzzle together as best I can beginning at the sitting. This continues on through my making any necessary compositional adjustments during the painting process and ending with where and how I sign a portrait. A desire to create balance, harmony and a sense of stability always serve as my guide. I try to achieve these principles through very careful color placement and by always thinking in terms of the verticals, horizontals and diagonals within the composition that I am creating. Good composition and design rarely happen randomly!

At the sitting, I take into primary consideration the overriding question of which elements can best contribute to my making a beautiful and timeless work of art and this alone will steer my choices towards certain lighting, clothing, props, and colors. While editing and prioritizing which ingredients can ultimately play a role, I make a concerted effort to include any object or setting that a sitter has requested or shown special favor for. Now comes the challenge of designing it all in a way where everything can work together in a pleasing manner. I find that creating a good composition is an organic and



Portrait of Nathaniel J. Soper, MD, Northwestern Medical Group, Chicago, Illinois, Oil on linen, 42" x 30"

By carefully placing the red and green elements and using strong diagonals and repeated rhythms, including large and small triangles, I was able to develop dynamic action and energy and move the eye around a complex composition.

intuitive experience. If I am working entirely from life, I may use a pair of L-shaped cardboard crops to help guide me in my compositional choices. If I am using photography as the primary reference, the camera becomes my cropping tool. Either way, I am always thinking about what is happening in the finite world of the two-dimensional painting that I will be creating. I am looking for ways to make my compositions stable and grounded through the use of strong horizontal and vertical lines and pyramidal shapes while diagonals can add a sense of movement and dynamism. Architecture and furniture, as well as shadow shapes and the draping of clothing or cloth, can all contribute to these visual shapes. The smaller still-life details are then positioned and arranged in the best way possible to serve as beautiful little bits of "eye candy" that add additional interest. Things can quickly become very busy, especially if a sitter is adamant that numerous objects be included in their portrait, so a good rule to always follow is, "when in doubt, take it out!"

I liken complex portrait compositions to a painted symphony: there must be an overall theme which binds everything together with gesture, lighting and color harmonies - all working within a rhythm of lines and shapes. The composition sings when it has good diagonal elements to add dynamism and action along with strong vertical and horizontal elements for stability. The impact of highlights, areas of contrast, and select color notes help to punch things up and guide the viewer's eye around the painting. When everything comes together well, the figure (or figures) will remain the center of interest while each additional part of the painting plays a role in the chorus.

As I am painting a portrait, I continue to keep composition and design in the front of my mind. If working from photography from a sitting, I find it essential to have an abundance of photographic reference material for any necessary compositing of information or need to move things around later. If I do not have something exactly where I want it after my photography from a sitting, I am not afraid to move it later in the painting process. I take detail shots and pulled back shots at different exposures and I also capture varied gestures. I will take my initial conception and try to make it better through a process of organic compositing and editing when I am at the easel painting. I do not use photoshop, as I prefer to work things out in studies or straight on my canvas as I push things around to achieve the best balance and flow.

One trick I always employ is working on an oversized canvas, where I can decide on my final crop for a painting later on. Along the way I will use rolls of white cash register receipt paper to adjust the borders of my work. All of this gives me added flexibility and takes away the stress of not having enough space or canvas to move things around to create the most balanced composition. I find that the time and effort it takes to restretch things at the end of the painting process is a very small price to pay to ensure the very best composition possible.

I am a big believer that the last ten percent of effort on a painting can reap some of the biggest rewards - especially for complex portraits. I will keep fine tuning edges, values, small details and color harmonies to achieve better compositional

balance right up until the end. Even my signature is a very deliberately placed final touch. Its size, color and location are often a final critical balancing note that has been very carefully considered!

John Seibels Walker is an academically trained artist in the classical realist tradition. He studied at Atelier Lack in Minneapolis, MN for 4 years before teaching at Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence, Italy. For the past 20 years he has split his time between studios in Charlotte, NC and Lucca, Italy where his primary focus remains Grand Manner portraiture. Further information regarding his work can be found by visiting: www.johnseibelswalker.com



Portrait of The Hon. Nikki R. Haley, Governor of South Carolina, Oil on linen, 56" x 38"

Because there was a good bit of detail requested to be included in this painting, I needed to be careful about the placement of objects and keep her clothing a column of solid white surrounded by harmonious color.



Portrait of Donald J. Sherrill, Vice Chairman, SteelFab Inc., Oil on linen, 52" x 36"

This portrait is part of a series of portraits depicting various aspects of a steel fabricating company. My challenge was to keep the central figure predominant while other figures would be depicted in the midground and far background. I accomplished this using strong blue color and horizontals to anchor the portrait while my use of warm colors and numerous diagonals direct one's attention to the sitter's head.



Portrait of John M. McCardell, Jr., XVI Vice-Chancellor, The University of the South, Oil on linen, 53" x 36"

It was important to include the brightly colored stained-glass window in the background as it told the story of the second founding of the university and to represent the sitter's field of historical study. So I designed the portrait with as many lines as possible directing attention to the head and where the central figure itself would create a strong monumental triangle.



Portrait of The Hon. John R. Kasich, Governor of Ohio, Oil on linen, 62" x 40"

I created a dark central vertical shape in my portrait of Gov. Kasich to draw attention to the figure and head while incorporating strong diagonals in the remainder of the painting. There were numerous angles used to draw the eye into the painting.