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Jeffrey B. Watts
instructing a student
during a workshop

Johnnie Liliedahl:

Using the Old Master Grisaille Method to Manage Values and Opacity

Among the many techniques Johnnie Liliedahl teaches in workshops and on DVDs are several Old Master approaches that help students understand the basics of oil painting. Her class on the grisaille method is particularly helpful in understanding how to develop an effective composition of values and how to handle paint quality.

BY M. STEPHEN DOHERTY

Liliedahl offered advice to a student who attended one of her still-life painting workshops.





Few artists are as adept at using 21st-century technology to teach Old World painting techniques as Johnnie Liliedahl.

She is able to teach those time-honored procedures in ways that help students make rapid progress in understanding and using the concepts. Using sophisticated digital video equipment to document a carefully organized educational program, Liliedahl is able to guide artists through a thorough program that leads to solid, measurable results. By the time students complete a face-to-face workshop or a prerecorded class, they are not left behind if they watch her demonstrations, follow her instructions, and complete the recommended exercises.

Liliedahl recently invited *Workshop* magazine into her studio near Houston and gave us a lengthy interview, during which she explained one particular Old Master technique that helps students deal with two of the most challenging aspects of oil painting: composing light, middle, and dark values; and modulating transparent and opaque applications of oil color. "Even if students are not intent on using the grisaille method after the workshop is concluded, they learn a great deal from participating in a three- or five-day class, or from watching and rewatching one of my DVDs," Liliedahl explained. "The reason is that they learn to deal with the all-important issues of value composition and opacity without the complication of color mixing and application. That is, they can learn each step without the confusion of having to simultaneously learn all the others that are important to oil painting."

The term *grisaille* comes from the French word for gray ("gris") and refers to the centuries-old process of first painting

a picture with just black, white, and shades of gray and then layering thin mixtures of oil color over that monochromatic image. The advantages of this technique are that values are dealt with in isolation; the glazes of color are kept thin and therefore luminous; and the finished painting usually has a smooth, enamellike surface rather than a textured, brushy finish.

Liliedahl pointed out that, although taking a workshop in grisaille painting can be very beneficial to artists, she encourages them to first take one of her classes in painting from a live model before studying the Old Master technique. "Painting from photographs is usually the last in the sequence of classes I recommend to students," she said. "It's better if they bring a knowledge of painting from life into a workshop on grisaille because they will understand how to bring lifelike color and a believable sense of three-dimensional form into the class, during which they will be working from black-and-white photographs."

"Every day of a workshop is carefully planned, and the supplies are organized so I can share as much information with the students as time allows," Liliedahl said in outlining what actually takes place during one of these face-to-face programs. "On the first day, I show them how to photograph posed models wearing costumes, and I make black-and-white prints of the shots they take. I don't allow participants to paint the exact same image as anyone else in the class because the point is to develop their individual creativity, not to measure their success against anyone else's."

Students attended one of Liljedahl's workshops in her La Porte, Texas, studio near Houston.



"I spend time talking about how to pose the models and bring their images into the viewfinder of the camera so the students will have a well-designed composition to work with once they actually take their photographs," Liliedahl explained. "If they think about the shape established by the model's pose and costume, the pattern of sunlight and shadows, the angle of the model from their line of vision, and the background, they can avoid problems that might otherwise develop."

THE DRAWING

Liliedahl shows students how to enlarge the images in their photographs by drawing proportional grid lines on both their photographs and their stretched canvases, and then she demonstrates how to draw the model on the canvas using raw umber thinned with fast-drying Liquin alkyd

medium. "I explain how to draw the outlines of the major shapes within the figure while referring to the photographs," she described. "Then I put a light wash of the raw umber in the background and tell students I am leaving that area unpainted until the later stages of the picture's development because I want to have a contrast between a thinly painted background and an opaquely developed figure. The process of transferring the image from the photograph to the canvas and establishing the drawing takes the entire first day, and having the Liquin mixed with the paint helps it become bone-dry by the next day so the students can apply the opaque grays over the drawing."

THE PREMIXED PALETTE AND THE GRISAILLE

Continuing to use the black-and-white photographs as a reference, Liliedahl instructs students to prepare a premixed palette of colors for the grisaille process. "I give each student a printed value scale and explain how to mix ivory black and white—either Permalba white or another brand that combines titanium and zinc white—with Turpenoid solvent to mix a range of grays that exactly matched those in the 8"-x-10" photographic print," the artist said. "I point out that it isn't important for everyone's mixtures of gray to be the same because they will all be working from different photographs."

Liliedahl's procedure for preparing the premixed palette is to first identify the lightest value in the photographs and mix a quantity of that value. Next she prepares the darkest dark, understanding that it will likely not be a pure black, just as the lightest shape will not be pure white. "It often happens that when artists refer to a value scale of 1 to 10, the lightest light is an 8 or 9 and the darkest dark is a 2, 3, or 4," she said. "The point is to mix what will be needed to match the range of values in the photograph."

"In my demonstration, *Daydreams*, the apron was the lightest light but it was not pure white, so I added a small amount of ivory black to the white paint and mixed the combination thoroughly with a palette knife," Liliedahl said. "Next I mixed the two tube colors to match the dark in the hair near the model's ear. With the two extremes identified, I was able to then mix the values in between. As I used the eight or nine values of gray on my palette, I went directly into working with the opaque mixtures in the flesh in the face and hands to begin approximating what looks like a finished painting. Unless the shape I was painting was a solid three-dimensional form, I would avoid using opaque grays because I want the peripheral areas to be transparent washes that suggest atmosphere. I encouraged the students to create as much of a finished gri-

Liliedahl's Materials

PALETTE

- ivory black
- ultramarine blue
- alizarin crimson
- cadmium red light
- yellow ochre
- Indian yellow
- Mars violet
- transparent oxide red

SURFACES

- 24"-x-30" oil-primed Belgian linen on Gatorboard

BRUSHES

- sizes 2 to 8 white bristle filberts
- sizes 4 to 10 sable filberts
- 1" flat sable; sizes 4 to 10 sable flats

MEDIUM

- Liquiglaze oil medium
- Liquin alkyd medium

BELOW

Lilledahl (wearing the striped shirt), showed the workshop participants how to pose models and then compose their images in the viewfinder of a camera.

BOTTOM

A wide-angle view of students painting from life in Lilledahl's Texas studio.



DEMONSTRATION: DAYDREAMS



Reference Photo

The photograph Lilledahl used as the basis of her demonstration of the grisaille technique.



Step 1

The instructor drew grid lines over a black-and-white print of the photograph so she could enlarge the image onto her canvas.



Step 2

Lilledahl drew the outlines of the major shapes in the photograph with thinned raw umber oil paint, and then brushed a wash of that earth color in the background.



Step 3

After setting up a premixed palette of grays by combining ivory black and white, the artist painted the gray values to match what she observed in her photograph.



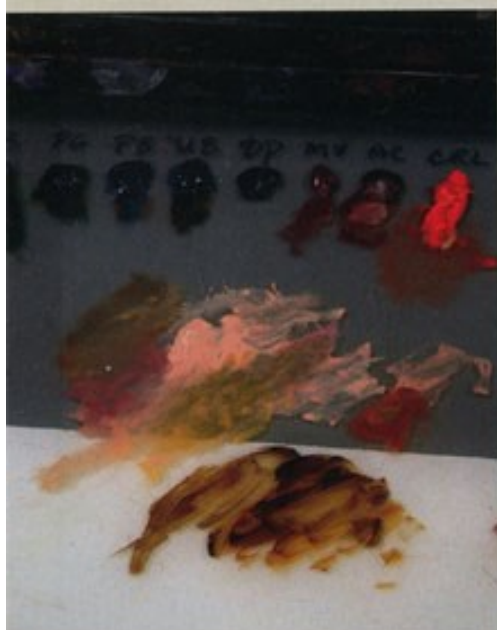
Step 4

Once the rendering of the model's flesh was complete, Lilledahl painted the clothing with mixtures of the black and white paint.



Step 5

After the grisaille was completely dry, the instructor applied glazes of oil color, starting first with the dominant flesh tone and then blocking in the woman's clothing.



Palette

Transparent mixtures of colors on the artist's limited palette of black, white, red, blue, yellow, green, and light



Step 6

Lilledahl began the process of painting impasto applications of color by brushing on a fairly thick layer of the lightest flesh tone

DEMONSTRATION: DAYDREAMS, CONTINUED



Step 7

Instead of thinning the impasto flesh color with medium, the instructor scrubbed the paint with a stiff bristle brush, thereby reducing the amount of paint applied to the canvas.



Step 8

Lilledahl pointed out that when she scrubbed a thin layer of dark flesh color over the underlying gray in such areas as the jaw line, she achieved an optical color.



Step 9

The instructor continued to refine the subtle definitions in the hair, clothing, eyes, and mouth.



Step 10

A detail of the face before the background was darkened with transparent washes of green and ivory black.



THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:
Daydreams

DEMONSTRATION: SEASON'S END



Step 1

A photograph of a model who posed for one of Liliedahl's painting demonstrations.



Step 2

The raw umber drawing of the model.



THE COMPLETED
DEMONSTRATION:
Season's End
2005, oil, 30 x 24.
Collection the artist.

saille as they could, ending up with a painting that was complete as a value statement because that was an essential part of this process."

THE COLOR GLAZES

After students finish painting the grisaille and allow the oil paint to dry thoroughly, Liliedahl shows them how to apply thin glazes of color to create a richly colored painting without using thick, opaque brushstrokes of oil paint. She has them begin with the single-best color in the figure, applying only that one local color. "I encourage the students to lay a basic orange/pink color in the areas of flesh just to set up a color reference so the flesh doesn't appear to be too light, dark, or dull," she explained. "They can then evaluate where the flesh needs to appear warmer or cooler depending on the source and direction of the light. In my demonstration, I pushed the warm color of the flesh and then blocked in a cool background with a transparent glaze of green. One of the big advantages of having a grisaille that is completely dry is that artists can experiment with different glazes of color without losing the underlying structure of the figure."

"I prepare both a light flesh tone and a basic shadow color on my palette and depend on those as the basis of all the colors I use in developing the painting," Liliedahl continued. "I start working in the lightest areas of the skin with a relatively thick glaze of paint and add more yellow or red to the base color as I move away from those light shapes, scrubbing the surface of the canvas with the brush so the grayer shapes become thinner and more transparent as I move away from the lighter ones."

"One of the beauties of the grisaille method is that the grays can be used to establish some of the cool shadows in the figure," Liliedahl continued. "In effect one creates an optical color that is different than what could be mixed on a palette. It looks much different

One of the ways Liliedahl helps students understand and paint lighting effects is to work from objects positioned inside boxes.



than if an artist applies thick layers of paint and then thins them. For example, you can see how I took advantage of the optical grays in establishing the model's jaw and the side of her neck in my demonstration. There is a kind of porcelain look to those smoothly painted features that is distinctly different than the brushy, gestured appearance of a face painted with an alla prima method."

Liliedahl pointed out that she used very little solvent in the oil paint for the demonstration, preferring to lay in thicker strokes of paint on the apron and sleeve and then scrub in the paint with a white filbert-shaped brush where it needed to be thinner. The only time she used a soft sable brush was to paint the dark colors in the eyes, nostrils, and the separation between the lips. "I encourage students to work with larger brushes toward the end of the painting process even though the style of painting was rather refined," the instructor said. "Edges are everyone's nemesis, and large brushes are effective in keeping them soft or calling out those that are important enough to be hard. The point was to eliminate edges that didn't add anything to the painting."

WHEN TO USE THE GRISAILLE METHOD

Liliedahl explains to her students that although she did a lot of grisaille painting when she was first studying Old Master techniques, she no longer employs the process in

creating her own pictures. "My preference is to work from life, with photographs only being a supplemental source of information about the subject," she said. "However, I encourage students to enroll in this type of class because it can be extremely helpful in sharpening their skills in evaluating values by eliminating color and just concentrating on the relationship of one shape to another. It can also give them the visual tool of using the relative thickness or transparency of the painting to express their responses to a landscape, figure, or still life."

Liliedahl explained that although the workshop on the grisaille technique focuses on progressive stages of developing one painting, her classes in painting from life involve using six to eight canvases that are either 12" x 16" or 16" x 20". "I hire two models to pose each day, and during the first two days of the workshop students paint one head study in the morning and another in the afternoon, moving to a new easel in a different part of the studio each time so that they have the opportunity to paint a profile, a three-quarter view, a full face with light on the left side, and a full face with light coming from the right," she said. "Then they concentrate on one painting during the third day of the workshop, starting with the same rapid painting methods used in the half-day sessions but going further with the picture; and on the final two days of the workshop

they can refine their paintings even more by spending both sessions on the same painting.

"Some students who participate in this alla prima painting class are less experienced and start out working more slowly," the artist continued, "so they may only get as far as finishing the drawing in the first half-day session, but they quickly gain confidence and understanding so that by the second morning they are able to get everything in the right position on the canvas." Liliedahl mentioned that although many of her workshops focus on painting the figure—because most artists are interested in facing that challenge—she also teaches workshops in still-life painting and has a following of artists who want to learn how she captures the same vitality and painterly qualities in her studies of flowers and beautiful objects. "I seldom spend more than four hours on a still life because I like to paint flowers and perishable foods while they still have their natural

shapes and colors," the artist explained. "I draw the entire composition with a loose, monochromatic drawing made with thinned raw umber, place the lights and darks, and then expand the values in between. In my workshops and DVDs, I show students how to place the shapes, nail down the cast shadows, and quickly move into color by working from the darks near the center of interest up to the lightest lights on the value scale."

TESTING STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE

Liliedahl said she also provides assignments to the workshop students and sets up specific painting challenges during a workshop so students leave with as much information as she can offer. "I don't let students learn just by the process of self-discovery," she stated. "I believe they will learn more by following a path marked by specific directions. For example, in a still-life painting class I want participants to know how to paint a variety of surfaces—metal, glass, ceramic, and cloth, for example—and I make sure I demonstrate the differences between high-key, middle-key, and low-key paintings so they understand the creative options available to them. I feel a responsibility to make sure students leave my workshops having learned what I think they need to know in order to pursue their own creative interests, not the limited number of techniques I was able to show them in a couple of demonstrations."

"I actually give them a test to find out if they have learned everything I set out to teach them," the instructor continued. "I give them a list of the materials, techniques, and terms to be covered, and at the end of the workshop I ask if they feel confident about their understanding of all those aspects of painting. If not, I devote the last part of the workshop to reviewing the information or picking up on the discussions that may not have been clear."

OTHER WORKSHOP PROGRAMS

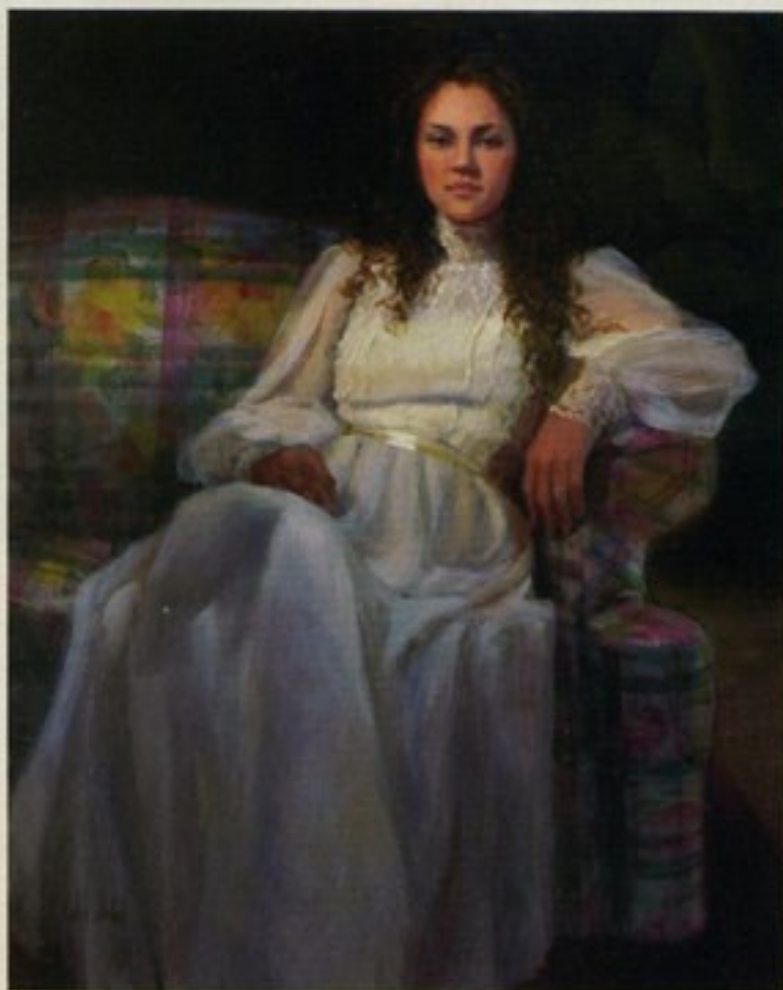
Liliedahl usually teaches grisaille and alla prima painting techniques in five-day workshops for limited numbers of students, but she also offers shorter programs that are orchestrated to ensure student progress even when there are a lot of students participating in the educational program. As the instructor explained, "In a three-day class the students all paint the same subject following some very specific procedures." ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.

About the Artist

Johnnie Liliedahl received a B.A. degree in economics from the University of Tulsa and then taught economics while participating in art classes at a local art-supply store. In 1975 she began teaching art classes in her own studio, and in 1987 she pursued graduate studies in painting and drawing at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. By 2001, she and her husband Ralph were running a dynamic educational business that included studio classes, workshops, and filmed art instruction. Today, Liliedahl Productions is one of the largest producers and distributors of recorded art instruction, with DVDs featuring some of the most important contemporary artists in the world. Furthermore, Johnnie Liliedahl maintains an active career as a fine artist, participating in exhibitions organized by the Oil Painters of America and by galleries. For more information, visit www.lilipubs.com.

DEMONSTRATION: LADY IN WHITE



Reference

A photograph of a model who posed for this portrait painting demonstration.

Step 1

Liliedahl's drawing of the model on a toned canvas.

Step 2

The grisaille underpainting of the model.

THE COMPLETED
DEMONSTRATION:
Lady in White
2005, oil, 30 x 24.
Collection: the artist.

Liliedahl's Work



ABOVE
Astros in Pewter
2004, oil, 12 x 16.
Collection the artist.

FAR LEFT
Teapot of Roses
2004, oil, 12 x 16.
Collection Janet
Goldbach.

LEFT
The Merry Wench
2003, oil, 30 x 24.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Master and Muse
2004, oil, 36 x 24.
Collection the artist.

