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A Traditional Approach to Portraiture

Searching for
Artistic Identity

When & How to
Remove Varnish

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COVER: *MARY* (DETAIL), BY HENRY WINGATE



Soaring TO NEW HEIGHTS

BY LINDA M. GOSMAN

WHILE OTHER NAVY PILOTS WERE thinking about latitude and longitude as their planes nosed through billowy clouds toward distant horizons, U.S. Naval Academy graduate Henry Wingate found his thoughts wandering to the subtle value, color, and texture variations of the elusive forms around him. Although art was Wingate's first love, and he produced credible drawings as early as age 6, the traditional values instilled in him by his parents drew him to the military. There he learned the importance of self-discipline and perseverance, two qualities that now serve him well as a full-time artist.

A recent winner in the American Society of Portrait Artists competition, the Virginia artist considers himself a traditional, realist painter, although a Photo Realist effect is not his goal. "I tend to be detail-oriented by nature and by my military background, but a painting is more interesting if you leave suggestive areas," the artist asserts. To clarify the painting's center of interest for himself and for the viewer, Wingate finds it helpful to establish a specific artistic goal first, creating on a strong visual statement. From there, he concentrates on accurately establishing the color, value, and temperature relationships among shapes, rather than tightly rendering the subject matter.

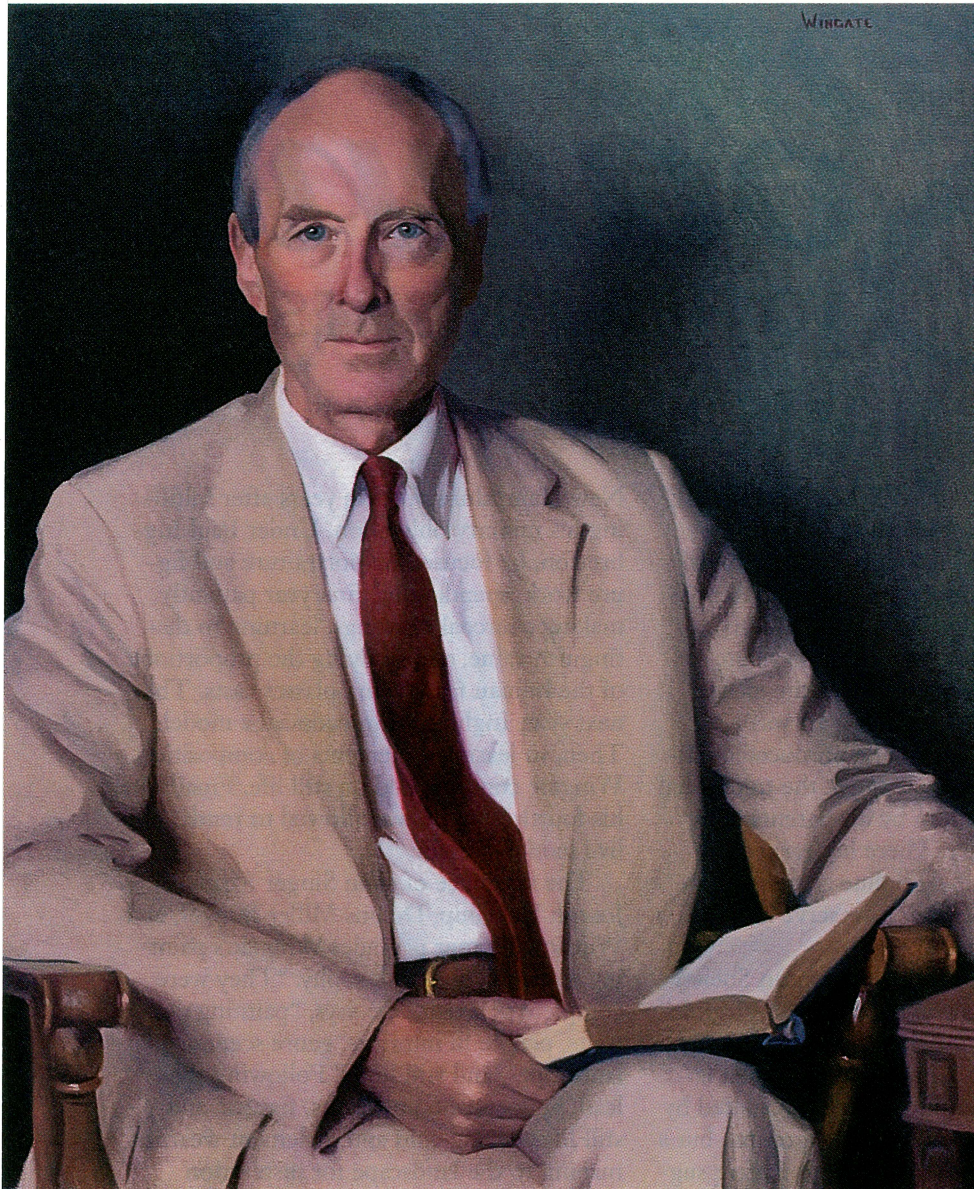
To pursue his youthful passion for drawing, Wingate attended the Ingbretson Studio of Drawing and Painting in Manchester,

New Hampshire, for five years after fulfilling his military obligation. Under Paul Ingbretson, he focused on portraiture and figure work, spending his first year patiently making charcoal drawings, learning to distinguish value, and studying the proportions of the human form using plaster casts. The next year, Ingbretson introduced a model. Then, to learn the elements of composition, Wingate concentrated on still life. Finally, in his fourth year, he was allowed to render a live model in color.

The influence of John Singer Sargent, Joseph DeCamp, Dennis Miller Bunker, and Winslow Homer pervades Wingate's painting approach and philosophy. "They were complete as artists," he says, "painting portraits, people in interiors, genre scenes, landscapes, and still lifes." Following their lead, he focuses on portraits, figures, and still lifes during cold and inclement weather, turning to the landscape for inspiration when weather permits. "Although I believe my strong point is painting people, a change in subject matter refreshes and sharpens my perceptions," the artist remarks.

Wingate paints five days a week, six hours a day. For portraits and figures, he generally works in two- or three-hour sessions, morning and afternoon, usually from two different models. "It takes me two weeks to a month to paint a picture," says the artist, who completes about 20 pieces a year, ranging in size from 8" x 10" to 30" x 40".

THROUGH A LINEAGE OF AMERICAN REALIST ARTISTS,
HENRY WINGATE FOUND HIS PLACE IN A TRADITION OF HIGHLY
DEDICATED PAINTERS, CHASING RADIANCE WITH EACH PASSING DAY.



Whenever possible, he takes advantage of natural lighting, relying on north light in the studio. Nearly always working from life, Wingate rarely uses photographs because they fail to report the subtle shifts of color that he strives to capture. Often the artist's high standards require his dedication as well as his subject's; he estimates that with his current commission, his subject, a college dean, will put in 25 to 30 hours sitting for the portrait. But Wingate also expects to work an additional 30 to 50 hours painting from a mannequin or a stand-in model wearing the same suit the subject wore for the sittings.

Whether challenged by the task of capturing the spirit of a human face or the mystical quality of a hazy summer morning, Wingate isolates a defining element that attracts him to his subject. In *Mary*, a portrait of the artist's wife, he was fascinated by the subtle play of color and shadow flowing across her features. "The variety of lost and found areas made this painting interesting," says Wingate. By selectively employing composition, lighting, color, and value contrasts to make his point, the artist personalizes his subject rather than copies it. "I like to find an aspect in a model or scene to take delight in while I'm painting," he

explains. When working en plein air, the artist visits a particular area at different times of day, under varying weather conditions, seeking the specific element that triggers his interest. "It's the beauty of the subject or scene that makes me want to paint," he notes.

To capture these often abstract impressions, Wingate completes a detailed drawing of his subject, using charcoal on heavy paper. "This process is very important," stresses the artist, who will spend two to three weeks on preliminary steps. "It gives me time, especially when working with models, to get to know the subject and try different poses and lighting that are characteristic of that person." When finished, Wingate uses strips of paper to crop the picture to a desired size, taking composition and balance into consideration. He then stretches his canvas—Claessens Belgian single-primed linen—to match these dimensions.

Next, Wingate completes color studies on wooden panels prepared with gesso or on heavy watercolor paper mounted to a Masonite panel with rabbitskin glue. Weighted down and allowed to dry for several days, the paper is then primed with another coat of glue and a small amount of dry pigment, such as earth red, to create a warm undertone. These preliminary exercises test the color scheme of the painting on a flat surface, allowing the artist to practice achieving the correct color relationships and ensuring accurate color on the final painting.

Ready to begin, Wingate relies on his drawing as a blueprint, and applies a few charcoal marks on the canvas to indicate the parameters of his shapes. Then, using a No. 8 or No. 10 brush, he applies broad strokes of paint, occasionally diluted with turpentine to better reflect the actual color he sees. The artist prefers Winsor & Newton or Rembrandt oils, arranged from warm to cool on his palette. They include lead white, yellow ochre, Naples yellow deep,

Mrs. Meyercord and Children,
2001, oil, 34 x 34. Collection
Mr. and Mrs. David Meyercord,
Columbus, Indiana.

Opposite page: *Erin,*
2000, oil, 29 x 23.



cadmium yellow lemon, cadmium scarlet and red deep, alizarin crimson, and burnt sienna. On the cooler side, he uses permanent green light, viridian, cerulean or Sévres blue, ultramarine deep, and ivory black. For portraits, he sometimes adds Venetian or Indian red to his palette; and to achieve rich and vibrant flesh tones, he uses a combination of ivory black, lead white, yellow ochre, and cadmium scarlet. Winsor & Newton Rathbone hog-bristle brushes are the artist's staple. For an underpainting he might use a No. 12 or No. 14, but in general, Wingate's working brushes are Nos. 6, 7, or 8 filberts. "I use a

small sable for detail, but find I stay broader longer using bristles," the artist notes.

Rather than start by drawing individual objects, Wingate lays in masses of color to render shape and form. "Drawing will come later," he says, "after I have good color. I find that if I draw first—defining angles and shapes or a profile—and I haven't concentrated on color, I have a harder time with color because I become too attached to the drawing." During the first sitting with a model, the artist establishes the larger light shapes and colored masses and their relationships to one another. "I like

working with paint directly from the tube," Wingate says, "but sometimes, to increase its flow or to increase the luminosity of my darks, I'll use a 1:1 ratio of sun-thickened linseed oil and Venice turpentine as a medium or equal portions of stand oil, damar varnish, and turpentine." The artist prefers to paint wet-in-wet, and he rewets areas if they dry while he is working.

In subsequent sittings, Wingate concentrates on subtle value and color variations within the form, which he continues to refine until he achieves a desired degree of detail

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SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS

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and focus. "I'm not going for a photographic look," he emphasizes. "Instead, I like lost areas, where everything isn't given to you. Some areas are lost; some things are suggested. It's better if I don't show everything." Wingate describes his process of developing a figure by establishing color and form first as "coming out of the fog," which he learned from Ingbretson. "With this method, I can stop early on and have a very hazy, loose painting—one that still has everything needed for a good painting, such as the right color and value," the artist explains. "Or I can go further and further, until I have something very finished. This method is especially helpful with portraits because, regardless of whether I need something very loose or very finished, I can follow the same procedure."

By showing clients the work as it progresses, Wingate gets a better idea of what kind of painting they have in mind. "I make a point of working only from life," he says. "Early in my career, when I needed commissions to survive and painted children who couldn't sit still, I had to work from photographs. Talking with a lot of portrait artists, I find that many use photos even when they don't have to. I try to do something different. Being with clients—during the initial drawing, color study, and all the stages of the painting—allows me to get to know them, and they can see my work and make changes along the way. With photos, you're stuck with a static image. It's not as organic or malleable as what develops working from life."

Constant changes can seem overwhelming, and many portraitists are deterred from painting from life for this reason. But Wingate cites a challenging perspective his teacher gave him to illustrate the outweighing benefits of the practice. "With Ingbretson, we would often complain about the

position of a model's hair or clothes changing every day, and he would tell us, 'Chase it. Change it every day,'" recalls Wingate. "So I do, and I've found that it allows the possibility that one day the hair will fall beautifully, better than I could have imagined; or that one day the way the clothes fall inspires a nicer line, creates a better curve; or that one day a subject may put his hand on the table in just the right way." For Wingate, these unexpected shifts—when things come together—are one of the nicer aspects of working from life. "It's harder to work from life," he continues. "Having the client there puts pressure on the artist—but it makes all the difference." Believing that the way he sees a subject becomes more accurate over time, Wingate constantly re-evaluates his painting, scraping out or repainting areas he's dissatisfied with, and then starting over. To finish, he softens aggressive edges, restates his darks, and strengthens important highlights.

Grateful to a succession of American realist painters and teachers for their inspiration and guidance, Wingate has also studied in Florence, Italy, under portraitist Charles Cecil. He notes that both Cecil and Ingbretson were students of R.H. Ives Gammell, who, during the 1930s, helped begin a tradition in America of teaching in the style of the atelier.

After Wingate left the Navy, he learned about the history of 19th-century representational painters in the United States and the atelier tradition Ingbretson followed, and knew it was what he wanted to pursue. "When I initially went up to check out the studio, I thought maybe it was a crazy thing to do," says Wingate. "But I wanted to find out if it would be possible to make a living from painting—so I tried it for a while. And the further I got, the more I saw that it could be done."

Wingate lives in a century-old farmhouse with his wife, Mary, and their young daughter, Mary Agnes, in Madison, Virginia. The artist is represented by Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, New York, and may be contacted at henrywingate@hotmail.com or www.henrywingate.com. ■

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