

starting with the DARKS

Sarah Lamb imparts her three-pronged method for combining classical principles and alla prima techniques in a workshop devoted to still life.

BY LOUISE B. HAFESH

DURING A THREE-DAY intensive workshop at the Grand Central Academy of Art (GCA) in New York City, Pennsylvania artist Sarah Lamb demonstrated how to paint a quick still life from start to near completion.

The classically trained artist studied with Ted Seth Jacobs in France and Jacob Collins (GCA's founder) at his famed Water Street Atelier during its early years. While not relinquishing academic principles, she incorporates a direct (alla prima) approach in her work, often foregoing traditional layers of underpainting. As a result, her still lifes are fresh, painterly yet representational, and on average finished in a relatively short time frame. An 18x24 piece takes about two weeks to complete.

Three Factors to Consider

Eager to tap into her formula for success, workshop attendees listened intently as Lamb kick-started the course by concentrating on three areas: choosing the subject matter,

figuring out design and composition and executing a color study.

"I like to paint things that spoil or die or start to smell because it forces me to paint quickly and not fuss around too much," admitted Lamb with a chuckle. "I'm naturally drawn to interesting textures and colors—fuzzy peaches, gooey cheeses, iridescent feathers on birds—and I love anything with a reflection," she went on to say. "Copper, silver, and brass are fun to paint because you pick up the colors that are all around the room and sometimes even your own reflection. Transparency, the effect of light when it shines through a clear object, is also fun and challenging."

Explaining her choice of the composition for the demonstration—a simple assemblage of three pears—as an opportunity for the class to see her bring a piece to near completion given time constraints, she acknowledged:



“My favorite part of the creative process is the actual setting up of subject matter that I’m excited about. I enjoy trying all different light situations, placements, backgrounds, angles, etc., and usually come up with a few different paintings in the process.”

Continuing, the artist touched upon the importance of time well spent on the setup. “Half the battle is working out problems and getting the composition harmonious before you start. Some things arrange themselves,

while at other times a setup can take longer than the painting itself,” she said good-humoredly. “If it’s a complicated composition, I usually leave it overnight and look at it with a fresh eye the next morning.”

Giving each participant the benefit of her astute compositional skills, Lamb next made the rounds, helping to tweak individual setups. Assessing one student’s arrangement, she made an interesting observation, which resulted in a slight but pivotal change. The original—a

ABOVE: Peonies and Hydrangeas
(oil, 19x20)

Learning to See

BY SARAH LAMB

1. Color Study: Before starting to paint, I always do a color or poster study (this one is 6x9), which consists of patches of color that aren't blended (top center). I begin my study by squinting to find the darkest dark and then proceed from dark to light colors. I don't draw; I see only in value and color. The poster study becomes a reference guide as I paint the larger canvas.

2. Toned Canvas: I use raw umber and Turpenoid and apply the mixture with a damp cloth to tone the canvas to a middle value. For this demonstration I used a New Traditions art panel, which I like for smaller paintings because I can cut each panel to size. I like the L600, which has a finer tooth.

3. Block-In: Since our goal for this demo was to complete a painting in three days, I did a very quick sketch or block-in of the pears in raw umber mixed with a little Turpenoid.

4. Background: To aid in nailing down the drawing, I filled in the background with raw umber and Turpenoid; this practice sets up the painting nicely for my later step of painting in the dark background.

5. The Darks: I went ahead and filled in the bottom and all the darks while I was at it. Having all the darks in place really helps me see the drawing come together.

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beautiful presentation of apples and a sparkling copper container—was significantly enhanced by a strategic placement of another apple, which Lamb explained widened the underlying, imaginary triangle, making for a more compelling and aesthetically pleasing composition.

Color Study as Tonal Key

Once setups were complete, Lamb discussed the benefits of utilizing a poster study of color and value (no drawing) that she said helps train the eye to see the major aspects of composition in a very general way (see Step 1 in the sidebar above). Crediting Ted Seth Jacobs

with introducing her to the concept, she followed with a show-and-tell on a 6x9 canvas fragment. “What I call a ‘poster study’ is an assemblage of patches of color that are not blended but rather put down side by side.” She suggested that students avoid small details by focusing on major areas only—imagining that they’re standing 50 feet away from their setups, since from that distance all one sees are major tonal relationships and colors.

“As a tonal key for larger paintings, this small, streamlined version of subject matter helps simplify the process; it becomes a visual reference guide,” she said. She offered further advice: “When you begin your study, squint



4



5

Materials

Paints: (any brand unless identified) ivory black, raw umber, transparent brown (**Schmincke**), transparent red oxide (**Gamblin**), alizarin crimson; cadmium red light, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow medium, Naples yellow light, Naples yellow deep, yellow ochre, transparent earth yellow (**Gamblin**), sap green, olive green, Kings blue light (**Old Holland** or **Schmincke**), cerulean blue, ultramarine blue, manganese violet (**Gamblin**), titanium white, brilliant yellow light (**Old Holland**), titanium nickel yellow light

Brushes: synthetic soft brushes (all sizes)

Canvas:

New Traditions art panels (L600), **Claussens** 13DP (for larger stretched pieces)

to find the darkest dark. It will be easier to compare the rest of the values in your painting if you start with that value first. Then, putting color next to color (it's the only way to get a true read), position the next value down beside that, and so on." She cautioned students not to move on to the third patch until the first one looks right, then added, "Thereafter, continue putting a patch of color next to a patch of color until you have a little study."

Advising us to center in on the large shapes to keep from getting too fussy, she said: "You aren't trying to make a pretty picture—it's just an exercise to help you with your painting. If done accurately, all of the colors and tones

come into harmony, and you actually end up with a nice little abstract picture." A quick glance around the room at students' attempts to follow her lead confirmed her point.

Toning to Middle Value

Lamb went on to reveal some procedural preferences: "I like to have lots of canvases prestretched in all sizes at all times," she said. "Once I set up a still life that I'm happy with, I want to dig right in!" Using a light wash of Turpenoid and raw umber, she tones her canvases to middle values and then lets the surfaces dry. "I always find it hard to start on a white canvas," she admitted as she began her



6. Massing in the Big Shapes: Consulting my color study and paying close attention to value, I massed in the big shapes. At the same time, I paid attention to the intervals of darkness.

7. Working from Dark to Light: Starting with the pear on the left, I worked my way from the pear shadow up, slowly into the light. I didn't want to get the first pear too finished without putting down some color and values on the other two.

8. Evaluating the Work: My background was still kind of rough around the edges of the pears because I wasn't ready to commit to my edges just yet. I blended the wet background into the pears to give them shape and dimension. Then, when the surface was completely covered, I did the fine-tuning, during which I added some middle tones between the shadow and the light of the pears. Finally I brightened my highlights.

Since I wasn't able to finish the painting in the workshop, I spent about an hour more on it at home. I never really work on

a painting without my subject in front of me. It's dangerous! Chances are whatever decision you make when painting from life is a better one than what you'd make if you start tinkering with it later. In this case I realized that my space under the tabletop was a little too dark and too cold. Having painted many still lifes that were similar in setup, I knew that I could fix the problem with a little warmth and a lighter tone.

Because my painting had become completely dry to the touch, back in the studio I "oiled out"—using a mixture of linseed oil and a little Turpenoid brushed on to bring back the lustre of the darks after they had sunk in. Oiling out is almost like varnishing, but you can safely work back into the painting. I next mixed ivory black and a touch of cadmium red light and painted it under the tabletop—coming just up to the edge.

Then I took my smallest brush and, while the painting was still in an oiled-out phase and easy to work into, I added a tiny warm tone between the light and the dark. Here's the completed demonstration, *Three Pears* (oil, 13x16).

demo by drawing with raw umber and turps directly on a 12x16 New Traditions art panel (see Materials, page 41).

“I try to get a loose outline of what I’m painting. How tight the drawing is depends on the subject matter,” she explained. “If I’m painting peonies, I have to work fast and loosely on the block-in and then just draw with paint. With subject matter that I can take my time on, I go for a rather detailed underpainting in just raw umber, and sometimes I can rub the lights out to the white canvas. After the initial drawing is done, I tend to start with what I see as the darkest darks, usually shadows, and work from there.”

Abandoning Preconceptions

Lamb pointed out that there are no hard-and-fast rules or formulas. The best tack is to abandon preconceptions and paint exactly what you see. “Nothing is hard to paint when you look at every object the same way. Squint—that’s the most important thing you can do to decipher values,” she said: “Look for darks, lights, shapes, and quickly dart your eyes back and forth from setup to canvas, making sure things are in the right place.” After owning up to often forgetting to do just that toward the end of many a painting, she declared. “That’s when I usually start ‘fixing things’—lightening the lights and darkening darks—but when you squint, you find that the problems are usually in the midtones.”

Painting What You See

Back to tackling the setup’s pears, which she likened to “little people,” Lamb suggested it’s a good practice to constantly re-evaluate, working with subtle changes in color. Referring again to the adage “paint what you see,” she demonstrated by accurately mixing splotches of color as identified in her subject matter and reference values in her color study, and placing each on her canvas row by row like a mosaic. “As you work, it actually looks like an abstract painting, which when completed comes together to form the image,” she said, adding that this method also works when painting copper and other shiny metals, subject matter the artist is noted for conveying.

Moving her painting along, Lamb commented: “Patience is hard for me. I paint fast and really struggle or lose interest when I’m slowed down by a problem. My work is at its best when it’s spontaneous, not overworked.”

Painting Pointers

BY SARAH LAMB

- In the beginning stages, wipe out with turpentine and clean up lines to define shapes.
- Put in a dark background, which will help you see the subject better early on.
- Be aware of edges. They’re the hardest thing to get and can trick the eye.
- Correct anything that bothers you right away.
- Refer often to your color (poster) study. Check color accuracy by dabbing your mixed color on top of the color on your color study.
- One of the benefits of working wet into wet is you can blend edges, pushing lighter color into dark.
- Always step back so that you don’t lose sight of the overall effect.
- Check values by viewing the painting through a black mirror or a smart phone held high and turned off. The darkened screen acts as a black light.

Meet Sarah Lamb



Years ago, Sarah Lamb found Atlanta portrait and wildlife artist Sarah Brown, who was kind enough to let a talented 10th grader join her adult night class. Taking Lamb under her wing, Brown became a mentor for the young painter throughout her career.

After graduating from Brenau Women’s College with a bachelor of science degree in studio art in 1993, Lamb attended a summer portrait-painting workshop in Santa Fe, New

Mexico, with renowned classical painter Jacob Collins. Duly inspired, she moved to France to study with one of Collins’s mentors, Ted Seth Jacobs, at L’École Albert Defois in the Loire Valley.

She has since had major sellout one-woman shows at the Meredith Long & Co. Gallery in Houston, Texas; the John Pence Gallery in San Francisco and the Spanierman Gallery in New York City. Lamb lives outside Philadelphia with her husband, the painter David Larned, and their two-year old daughter, Sadie.

Finally she cautioned against trying to pander to an audience. “When artists attempt that, it’s apparent,” she said. “And to what end? Successful paintings ‘sing’ without being gimmicky. By that I mean they’re alive with color and the values are all in place. My advice is to paint what you’re attracted to, find beautiful, and love. In the end, that honesty will always shine through.” ■

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