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OIL PAINTING TECHNIQUES FROM ARTIST DAILY

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Expert Oil Painting
Tips to Enhance Your
Oil Painting Art

Behind a Beautiful Painting

DAVID A. LEFFEL TEACHES ARTISTS TO RESPOND TO LIGHT AND SHADOW, VALUES, EDGES, COLOR, SPACE, AND TEXTURE—THE ABSTRACT QUALITIES OF A PICTURE, RATHER THAN THE IDENTITY OF THE SUBJECT MATTER OR THE TEDIOUS FORMALITY OF RENDERING.

by **Stephen Doherty**

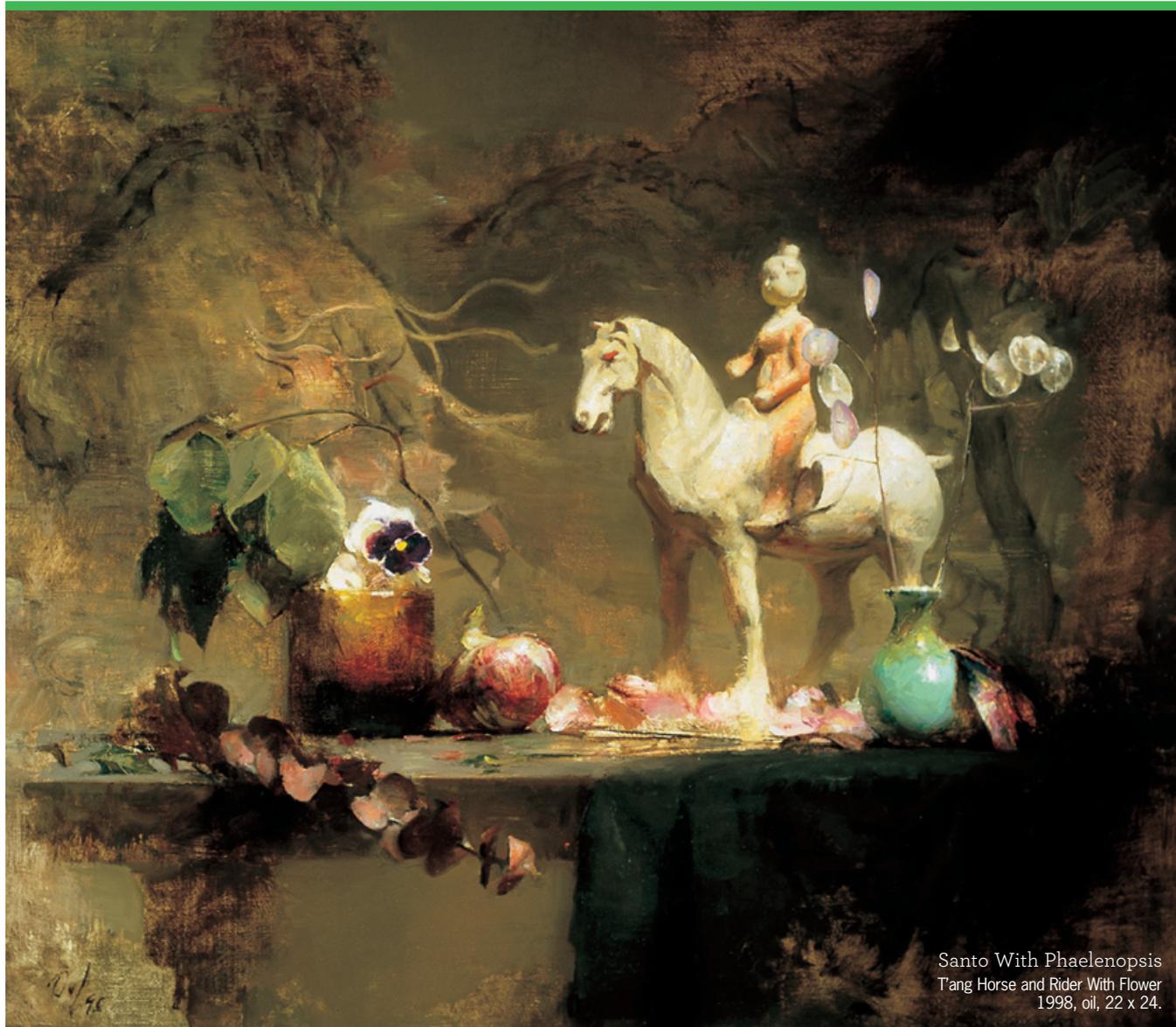
After more than 35 years of teaching drawing and painting, David A. Leffel is widely recognized as a master of a particular approach to oil painting, one that emphasizes the abstract concepts that have guided artists for centuries. The ideas he advances are at once simple and all-encompassing. They promote the need to understand the basic notions implicit in expressing our perceptions of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface, taking full advantage of the natural qualities of the materials at our disposal. In short, Leffel teaches that painting is about the paint and its ability to create beauty on a canvas.

“Most people begin painting by trying to match the reality of what is in front of them,” Leffel explains. “The closer they come to achieving that match, the more they believe they have accomplished something. But in truth, they have only copied what is outside of them. That kind of external process doesn’t lead to a fulfilling conclusion.”



ABOVE

Santo With
Phaelenopsis
2001, oil, 26 x 22. All
artwork this article private
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Leffel. Photos courtesy
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Santo With Phaelenopsis
Tang Horse and Rider With Flower
1998, oil, 22 x 24.

To better understand Leffel's conceptual methodology, it helps to contrast it with other painting approaches. "The conceptual approach has nothing to do with the artist's personal feelings toward the subject matter," he writes in his latest book, *An Artist Teaches: Reflections on the Art of Painting* (Bright Light Publishing, Santa Monica, California, www.brightlightpublishing.com). "The artist is concerned with making a beautiful painting. Beautiful configurations

of paint. Beautiful spots of color or colorlessness. Beautiful edges or empty space. That is the problem.

"There are today and have been through the years, painters who are skilled craftsmen," Leffel goes on to write. "Talent and facility abound, run rampant even, if we include all the excellent commercial illustrators. What is in short supply is taste. Talent without taste is tragic. Taste must be cultivated. It must be nourished in every

aspect of one's life. It is the consideration of life itself."

Although Leffel cautions against being overly concerned about such things as anatomical detail, the identity of the subject, strong emotional content, and tedious detail, he is not trying to limit artistic expression. Quite the opposite, he tries to bring attention back to the concepts celebrated in the work of such masters as Van Dyke, Rembrandt, and Velázquez. "Great painting is the product of a mind that is seeing, tasting, exploring the entire fabric of life," he explains.

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George Carlson and
Boy With Eagle
1991, oil, 42 x 34.

Self-portrait in Costume
1995, oil, 1734 x 1334.

“Great painting is the product of a mind that is seeing, tasting, exploring the entire fabric of life,”

Leffel is quite articulate in explaining how to pursue that exploration. In his books, videos, live demonstrations, and class discussions, he offers specific descriptions of how one should approach drawing and painting. For example, on the question of how to hold a brush, he says, “The brush is held toward the back, away from the ferrule. It rests on the side of the middle finger, held in place by the pressure of the thumb. The finger rests on the wood of the handle. The fingers are long rather than bent. The brushstroke is made from the shoulder. The fingers, wrist, and elbow do not move individually—the whole arm moves as one unit.”

When discussing relative values within a painting, Leffel again is very specific with his advice: “When setting up a still life, posing a model for portrait or figure composition, or viewing a landscape, the artist has the definitive task of visualizing and assigning the



various elements of the subject matter a value. To accomplish that requires averaging out each area of light or dark into a singular value. This is called massing. The bigger and/or simpler the masses (light mass versus dark) the greater the potential for a fine painting. A painting comprised of many small areas of lights and darks will look petty and small. Conversely, a painting with a few major masses will look big, simple, and powerful.”

Leffel has the unusual ability to offer

this kind of instruction while in the midst of creating a painting, making it possible for those who observe his demonstrations to learn both from what he says and what he does. Quite frequently he uses analogies to writing or composing music when he describes his painting process. “Putting objects into a still-life painting is like using characters in a novel to advance the plot,” he says. “The decision about how many characters a story needs and what kinds of personalities those individuals should have

Apricots With Hantz Vase
1997, oil, 15 x 21.



is the same as deciding on the colors, values, and textural changes in a painting. Everything has significance—or it should have. The choices shouldn't be haphazard.”

In most of his demonstrations, Leffel establishes the dark shadow areas in his paintings quickly. “Think about what needs to be seen and what should be a background to that area of interest,” he advises. “The more you know about the way you want the picture to come out, the more it will happen. If, on the other hand, you ‘wing it,’ then you’ll likely wind up in a difficult position. You’ll wind up where you don’t want to be.

“I advise artists to start painting the darks in the background and save the lights until the last part of the painting process,” he adds. “Darks give structure to the painting and give you a reference for all the other areas of the picture. Painting is developing a series of relationships—thick and thin paint, soft and hard edges, warm and cool colors, foreground and background shapes. Those relationships get viewers to look at one place and not another. They are like loud and soft passages of a musical performance that either demand intense attention or a more relaxed state.”

People watching Leffel demonstrate often pose questions about the Maroger medium he dips his bristle brushes into when mixing colors on his palette. Maroger is a somewhat controversial medium made by heating litharge (or lead white) and linseed oil, then combining that mixture with mastic varnish and turpentine. “A medium allows you to manipulate the paint in a comfortable fashion,” he says in response to the question. “I once used copal painting medium even while I was selling Maroger to students at the Art Students League to help support myself. One day I ran out

T'ang Horse
1993, oil, 32 x 36.



Drawing is a matter of focus and concentration. Rubens and Michelangelo could create a feeling of form with simple line or tone because they could see the form they were drawing from a specific point of view

his paper or canvas sketched in rather than polished and refined. “If a thinly painted area of a canvas or a roughly sketched section of paper is beautiful as it is, there’s no reason to cover it up unless it distracts from the rest of the picture,” he explains. “Sometimes I cover an entire canvas or sheet of paper from edge to edge and don’t allow any of the undersurfaces to remain visible. Other times I allow the loose paint or charcoal to remain sketchy against the white surface. As with every other decision, my initial concept guides me in determining how to complete the image. If the empty space is beautiful and supports the concept, I leave it alone.” ■

of copal medium and used Maroger instead. I liked the way it modified the paint, so I continued using it.”

Leffel is just as clear in describing a conceptual approach to drawing as he is about painting. He urges artists to make quick gesture drawings rather than renderings of plaster casts of models holding the same pose for hours. His point is that in a gesture drawing one is more apt to capture the total sense of the figure than if one drew the linear outlines of body parts or the subtle gradations of shadows. “Drawing

is a matter of focus and concentration. Rubens and Michelangelo could create a feeling of form with simple line or tone because they could see the form they were drawing from a specific point of view,” Leffel says. “There can’t be that kind of convincing form when you are only matching spot for spot as artists do when they slavishly draw plaster casts or use the sight-size method to copy reproductions of classic works. Their viewpoint is so limited.”

In both his drawings and paintings, Leffel often leaves sections of