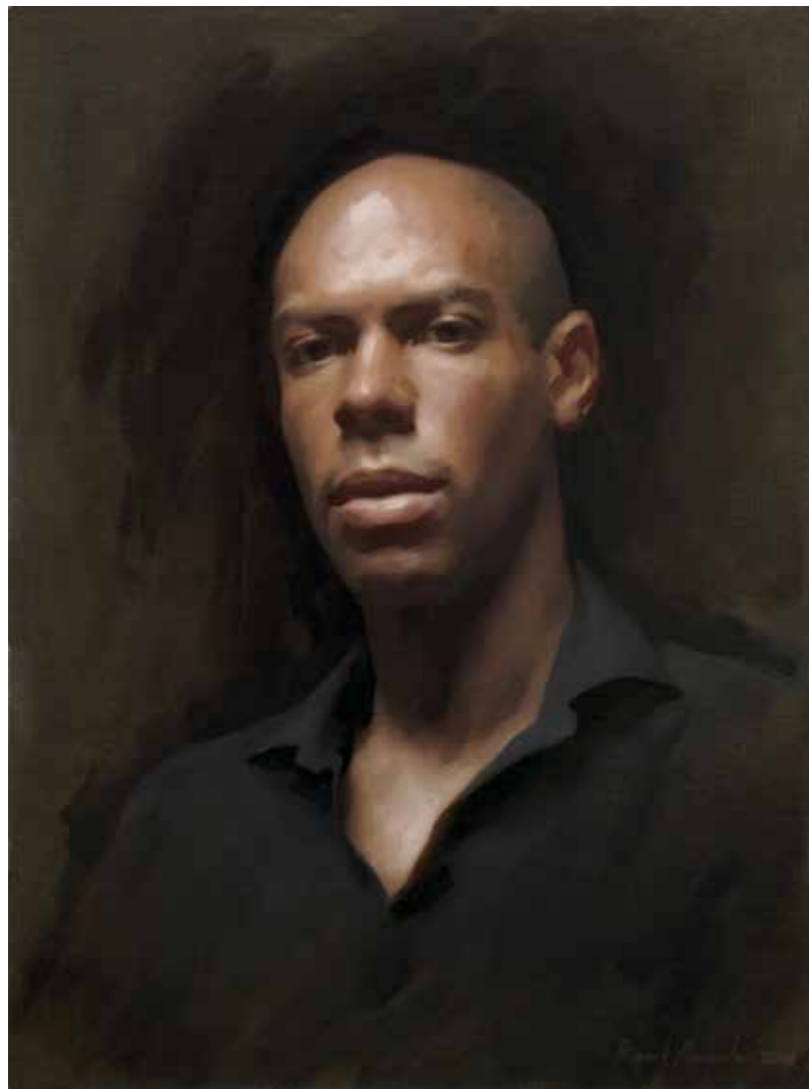


SI SAPSFORD : SIGHT- SIZE AND SARGENT

How did a couple of smears of paint resolve themselves into a hand clearly gripping a paintbrush? And how did the different tones of white, so loosely painted, become the soft folds of a dress or parasol?



TURPS BANANA

The sight-size method requires that the sitter or model be exactly next to the canvas; there is no scaling up or down just a transferring of information. The top of the model's head will be at exactly the same height on the canvas, and the chin the same height as that of the model too. By standing in the same place (about three metres) from the model, I began to make marks that corresponded to notable points on the model, marching back and forth to the canvas, a basic head-shape began to emerge.

I didn't know anything about the method when I received the invitation to participate in a weeklong workshop with Rupert Alexander at the *National Portrait Gallery* held during its Sargent exhibition. But I found that the direct copying of nose; of eye, wasn't really the point. In fact, the real test was to ignore these known features and focus instead on the shadow shapes. That was how Sargent was taught by Carolus-Duran. It was all about abstract shapes: not thinking too much about what you are painting but more about abstract shapes and how they relate to each other. During the week, all the materials were provided (canvas, paint, brushes, etc.), and there was also one model for every two artists. To make things easier for a beginner, Rupert had set up the models and easels so that the windows cast strong shadows upon them, so that even a beginner, using this method, could begin to pick out and trace the shadow patterns. The real trick is to ignore what you know and just look for these light and dark tonal shapes. Rupert is an expert in the sight-size method. Although he was trained in Florence, his tutor was actually from Boston, where they have held onto the old traditions – passing down skills from tutor to student in the old manner. I began to get more familiar with Sargent's work, and throughout the week, I would pop into the exhibition and closely examine his paintings. I was becoming familiar with terms such as

ISSUE TWENTY

'*alla prima*' (first-hit portraits done in one sitting) of which Sargent was the master, and with his *bravura* style. I was also beginning to appreciate how abstract the results of this sight-size method actually were. From a distance, the portraits seem almost photorealistic, but close up they are all abstract shapes and brush strokes, a map of one tone next to another, no contours, and presented in a loose and confident manner. I couldn't believe how loosely-painted most of his work was, whilst, at the same time, spot on. How did a couple of smears of paint resolve themselves into a hand clearly gripping a paintbrush? And how did the different tones of white, so loosely painted, become the soft folds of a dress or parasol?

In his early paintings, the paint is applied uniformly, in the manner of the *beaux-arts*, but soon there is a shift away from this; the darkly-shadowed areas of faces become thinly sketched-in using only cadmium red, ultramarine blue, ivory black, yellow ochre, with certainly no white to cloud the shadows. For lighter skin tones, the paint becomes thicker impasto (lead white mixed with the four shadow colours). Sargent doesn't mess around painting eyelashes in minutest detail, and here I find something that speaks directly to paint and its application: his is the supreme confidence of someone who has technical mastery combined with a quite sublime impressionistic sensibility. Up close you really find that you are just looking at different tones of light and dark, and if these combine to give an impression of a nose or an eye, that is something that seems almost an irrelevance.

I have two days to complete my work, having spent two days drawing. (Rupert had quickly realised that we needed more time to learn how to pick out the shadow line whilst ignoring everything else – "*Look for the big shapes*".)

On day one, using my pre-primed canvas (the background tone previously thinly-applied using a little red

umber and ultramarine blue mixed with turps), I begin to sketch in the basic head-shape and shadows using a no.8 hog hair brush (large is good apparently). Using red umber, turps, and linseed; keeping the paint thin; Rupert assures me that with experience this stage can be skipped (*alla prima*) and, seeing how quickly he can turn around a portrait – from merely resembling the model to really looking like the model with only a few swift changes – I am sure he is right. It's all about really looking, and not simply doing what our conscious brain tells us to do. The shadow-shape needs only to be slightly wrong for the personality of the sitter to be lost.

There is a lot of walking using this method; back and forth we go, to and from the canvas, although with practice and confidence the ground covered would be a lot less. By the end of the day we are all tired, but pleased. (Apparently, Leonardo da Vinci said that the distance from a canvas should be three times the longest dimension of the painting, and that, essentially, is all sight-size is.) On day two, our instructions are to pick out the darkest darks and block them in, and then do the same for the lightest lights; after this we can mix a mid-tone (still only using the five colours), and lay it between dark into light so that the white doesn't muddy the shadows; on no account go for the details. I only had time to plot in the shadows, and certainly no time to fake an eye in the dark tones; it wasn't a work of genius, but I was still rather pleased.

I wondered why sight-size fell out of fashion, but I suppose when modernism came along the chain from teacher to student, right from the Renaissance, was broken. Nevertheless, although it sounds arcane, it is still probably the way most painters paint (when they are not looking at a photograph).



National Portrait Gallery workshop painting – Si Sapsford 2015

Courtesy of the artist

Opposite: Chris – Rupert Alexander 2006 Oil on canvas 65 x 50 cm

Courtesy of the artist