The most famous portrait of the Renaissance was by an artist called Leonardo Da Vinci - the '*Mona Lisa*' or '*La Giaconda*', the wife of a Florentine citizen.

Mona Lisa, 1503-5. Observe the irregularity of the face - one side is more rounded.

She was supposedly saddened by the loss of a child during the period of the painting and Leonardo arranged for music to be played to distract her from her sorrows.

The development of the High Renaissance in Italy spread to Northern Europe and influenced the painter Albrecht Durer (1471-1528). He painted self-portraits with a critical eye and a flair for capturing an inner character. The close study of models and desire for realism was a development of 'Renaissance' thinking.

Let us look generally at the possibilities of composition with the considerations of shape and colour balance. We will then consider the other elements of backgrounds, pose and settings, as well as lighting, separately.

It is helpful as you think about beginning work on your portraits to make a few composition studies, bearing in mind that colour and shape are both important elements. Try the technique of cutting a rectangular shape out of paper and viewing your subject through the frame. Or alternatively cut two L-shaped brackets which can be moved and adjusted to form a rectangle of any proportions.

Here are some examples for you to consider. Do try some of your own.


Studies for composition.

A. Colour and Shape

B. Position in square or rectangle.

THE BODY

Lastly some general guidelines to help you give your male and female figures the right proportions.

The average height of the female figure is about seven and a half times the length of the head.

The average height of the male figure is approximately eight times the length of the head.
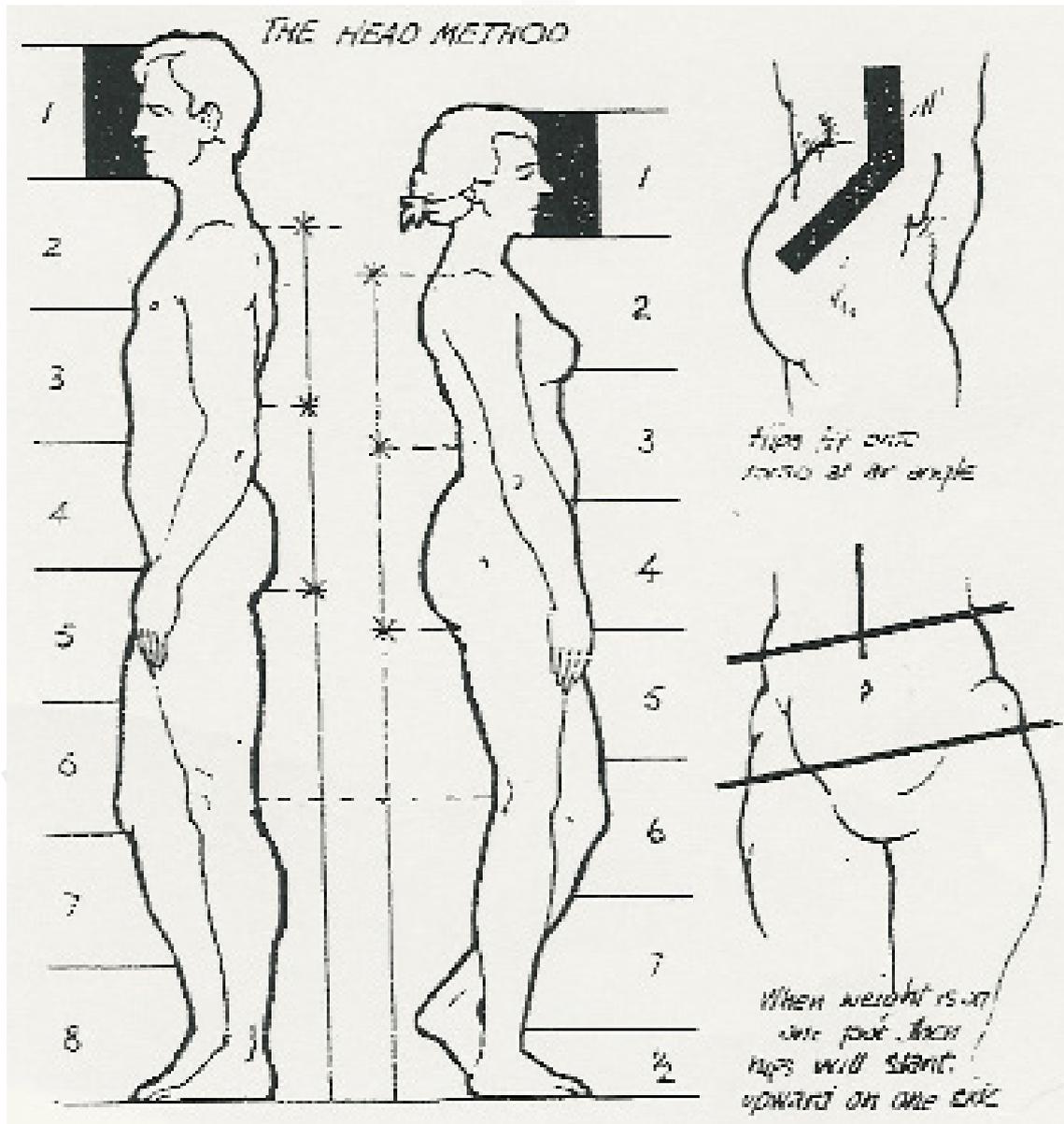
Stage 3 - Using the side of a piece of Burnt Sienna 6 lightly stroke across the facial flesh for the mid-tonal effect. Madder Brown 0 can then be used to define the light areas of the face with a slight rubbing technique blending the colours for an underpainting. Then restate the highlights with Madder Brown 0.
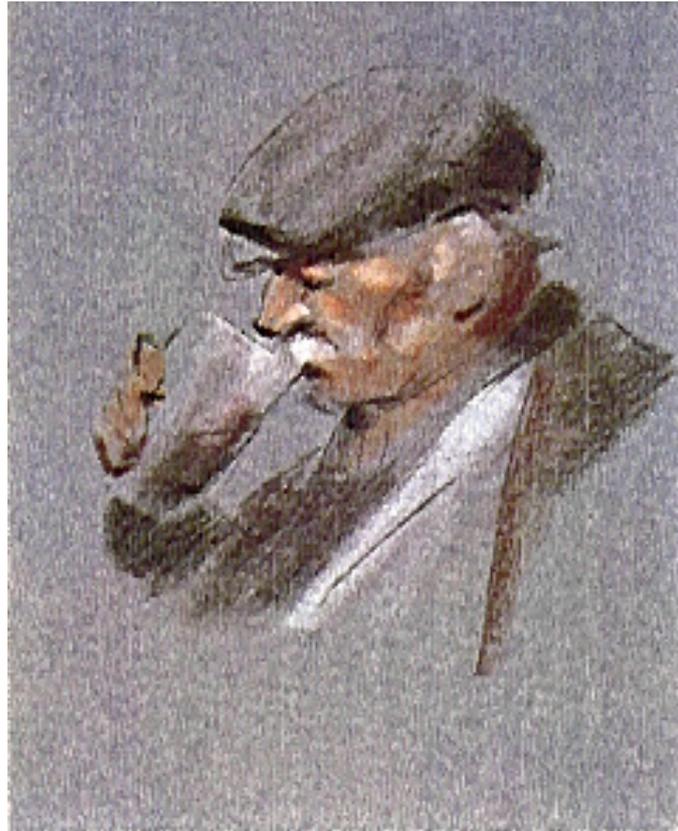
Stage 4 - Introduce a background tone to the head using Prussian Blue 1, Lemon Yellow 1 and Silver White. These provide contrast to the dark areas. The roundness and depth of the head is best achieved by keeping the outline soft.
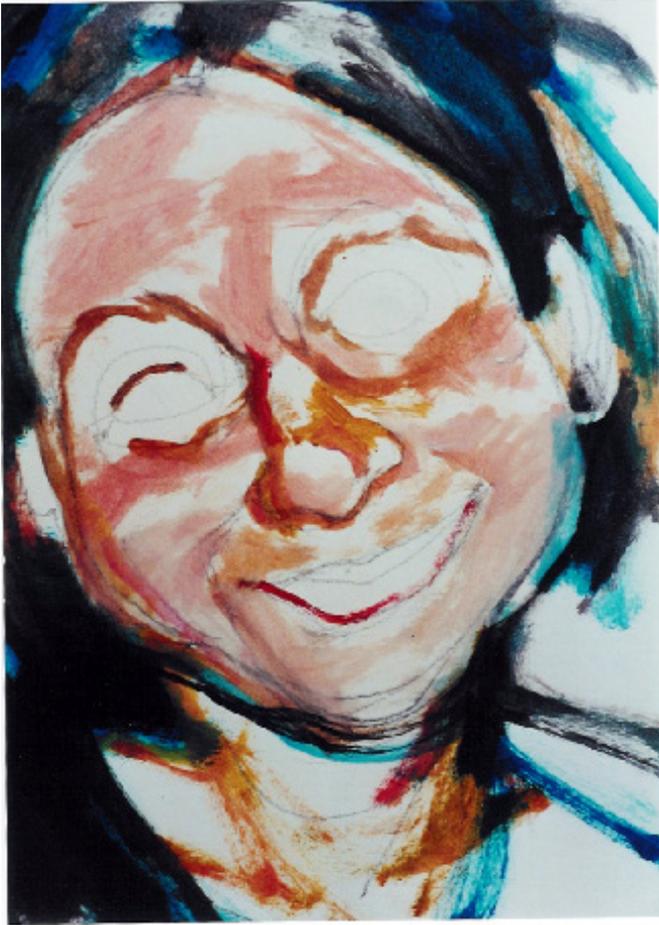
Step 1

Step 2

Other Equipment

Usually the equipment used for oils or watercolour can be used for acrylic. It is best to use a white clean-off palette, because acrylic dries very hard. Rowney produce a 'stay-wet' palette that keeps colours wet for a few days if you find that easier.

If you are using acrylics for the first time it might be helpful to begin with the features and to learn some techniques for these areas.

THE MOUTH

The most important thing to remember is that the mouth is not a flat shape, and the lips and face around the mouth have a distinct form and volume. The mouth is very mobile and can add subtle expression to a portrait. The most common mistake with painting mouths is to use an entirely linear approach. The correct way is to model the mouth in a sculptured way, in terms of light and dark, and hard and soft edges. Upper and lower lips have distinct features - the lower one always being fuller and catching more light. Begin with dark tones and add highlights last, introducing a variety of hard and soft areas. Don't make the mistake of painting lips too red, use the same colour mixture as the skin with a touch of red added.