

Classic portrait lighting techniques

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Imagination is not always the only ingredient to successful illustration. There is simply no room for ignorance when it comes to the theories behind the technique. In this case I want to discuss the importance of lighting in the portrait, as well as how skin reacts to it, and illustrate some of the aspects worth paying attention to.

As we travel through the time and revisit some of the paintings created many years ago, there is a thought going through mind. Artists in the past did not have the luxury of today's modern innovations to aid them in the process. Most of the paintings were done using natural lighting; such as sun during the daytime and moonlight at night, with the exception of candle light to add secondary light source. Even using natural lighting, we can still achieve myriad of effects, depending on the position of the light source.

As an example I want to point out how Caravaggio used his light to create drama through the strong depth of shadows and bold directional light source. This technique was successfully used by many artists wanted to depict dramatic mythical and historical scenes amongst other subjects. On the other hand, William Bouguereau used diffused ambient light, in which his subjects were enveloped by light and bouncing hues from the surroundings, therefore creating ethereal, cheerful feel as oppose to dramatic outcome.

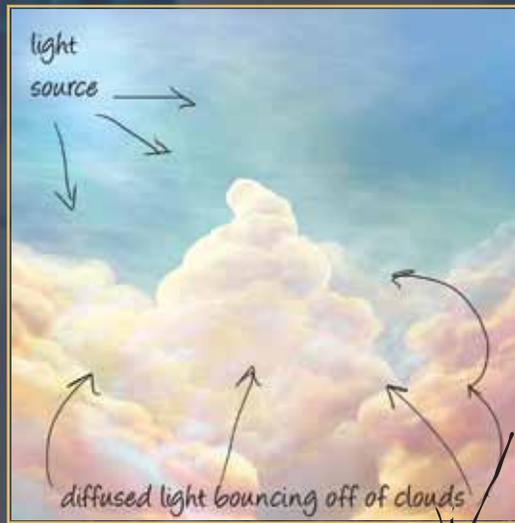
With the progression of technology things changed, so that in the world of art we can now add as many light sources as we want, as well as mimic the natural light when there is none. Although the techniques have somewhat changed, the principals stayed the same. Mastering skin tones through lighting is not an easy task. It takes time and determination to understand the complexity of skin, so we can achieve the level of mastery of some of the greatest artists of our time.

Steps to lighting a portrait



LIGHTING

Before we start, let's see what happens to the subject under one directional light. Remember, stronger light source will cast deeper shadow. Also, warmer light will create cooler shadow and vice versa.



CHOOSING THE SCENE - BACKGROUND

I've decided to place my character high in the sky amongst the clouds. Considering she is a Goddess, clouds seem a right place to start with. The clouds will be used as a stepping stone for light to bounce off of as well as to give me the richness of hues down the road.



SKIN TONES

Choose the palette carefully. Consider the environment at this stage. Skin is a very complex organic matter. A little bit of knowledge about what's going on under the skin will help you determine how to tone it properly under any circumstance.

Make the skin glow

The lighting and environment relationship, and their effect on the skin



FACIAL ANATOMY

Bear in mind the way human skull is formed, this will determine where to shade and how to contour the shapes the right way. Eye sockets will have deeper shadows as they are inlayed deeper, and nose, cheeks and chin will be exposed more, therefore hues will be lighter.



highlights shadows

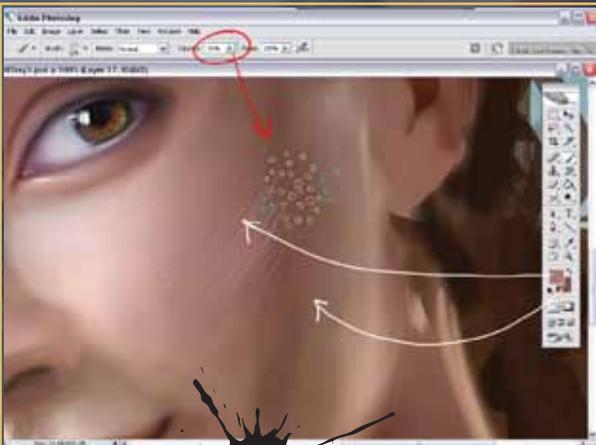
SHADING

Shading is important to achieve the feel of dimension as well as determining the light source. Remember, skin will be lighter closer to the light source and darker in places further away from the light source. In this case, values are not as deep as they would be in the dark surroundings.



EYES

Always think of their shape. Eyes are not just flat surfaces. Think of them as a round ball and paint them with the darker edges and lighter around the centre. Here I've used two tone darker shades to paint the edges. In addition, I've used a very light violet hue over the eye balls to make them glow.



BLENDING

There are few different ways to blend the color, but I always use the same method – Spatter brush, Opacity set to around 50%. Use Colour Picker to select joining colours and change them simultaneously while in the process of blending.

USE OF REFERENCE MATERIALS

Before you attempt to paint a portrait, or any other subject for that matter, it is advisable to build a library of reference materials.

This is imperative if you want to stay true to a certain period, style or the likeness of a person.



DEVELOPING THE SKIN HUES

The character in this example has light, porcelain like complexion. To visualise this further, I am adding faint bluish-purple hues over her forehead, nose, and portion of her cheeks. In those areas, skin is very thin which will expose some of the blood vessels right underneath the surface.



BOUNCED HUES

The most prominent appearance of the bounced hues will be on the opposite side of the light source. So I paint some nice shades of pink, purple and orange hues on the side of her face shaded from the direct light. In addition, I add a layer of haze (Layer Mode set to Hard Light) to further the effect of daylight.



SKIN HIGHLIGHTS

I decided that some of the residual lighting would be instrumental to highlight the right side of the character, considering the ambient lighting I chose for this exercise. So I panted some faint highlights along her chin, ear and portion of her neck.

Stylizing the character

It's all in the details



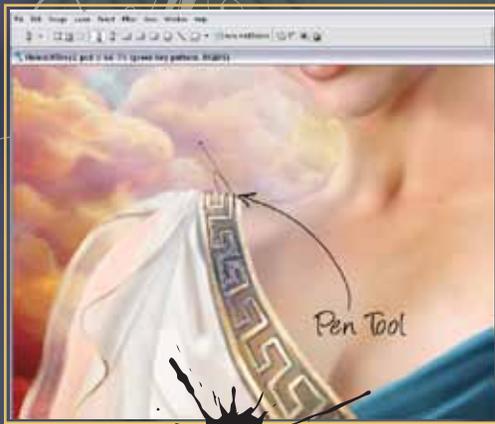
CLOTHING

Clothing items tell us about the person who wears it. My character is a Greek Goddess so I chose to paint white Stola draped over one of her shoulders and deep sky blue wrap over her other shoulder. To paint in the folds, I've used Soft Round brush with Opacity set to 100%.



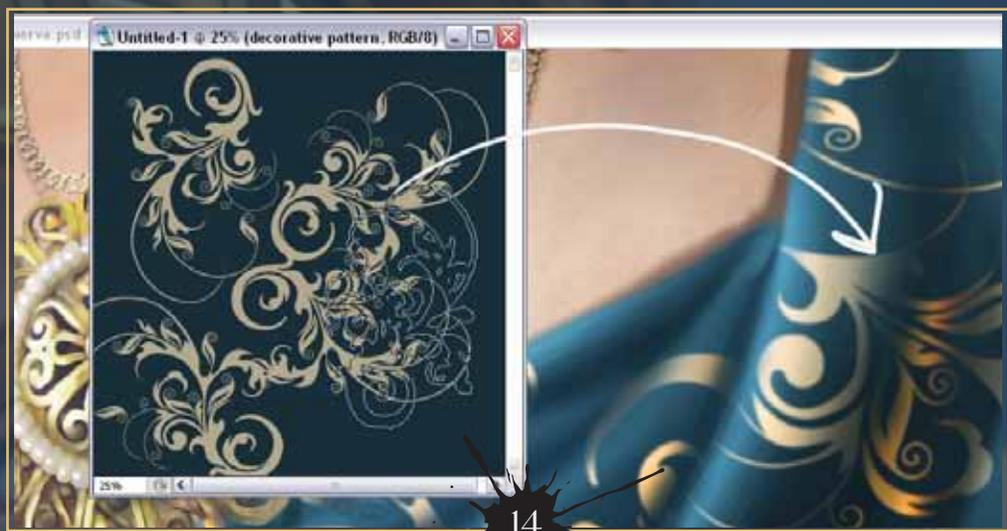
STYLING

I wanted to stay away from already seen designs of Stolas, I've added a sheer piece of fabric suspending from the shoulder. I've used a Pen Tool to select the area I wanted the sheer fabric to be and the Soft Round Airbrush with the Opacity set to 50%. I painted the edges first, leaving the centre untouched to create a feel of transparency.



DETAILS 13

To tighten things up with the chest area, I've added a golden trim with the Greek key pattern to the white Stola. Again, I've used a Pen Tool to select the area with the pattern.



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PATTERN

As a finishing touch I decided to place a golden swirl pattern on the blue wrap, to balance things around a bit. I carefully laid down the swirls to sit next to each other (not overlapping). Then, I used Burn and Dodge Tools to paint along the contour of the folds in the fabric.



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HAIR

Painting hair can be frustrating, especially when there is a certain style involved. The best way to tackle painting hair is in sections. As a first step, I use big brushes (such as Soft Round or Airbrush Hard Round brush) to block in the basic form of hair. This may take many tries, but be persistent.



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HAIR TEXTURE

Ancient Greek hairstyle has many folds, twists and curls. I pick one section at the time to paint in the fine hair strands, using couple shades lighter colour than the base, and a custom Bristle Brush, but any dotted spatter brush will do. Make sure you follow the form of each section to make it look as believable as possible.

LIGHTING

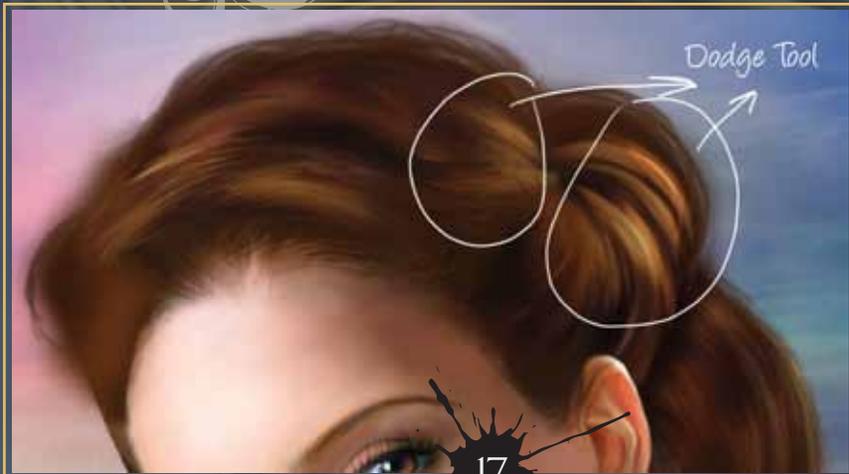
An instrumental component to tackle right at the beginning and follow its direction all the way to the end. Make sure to always keep in mind the strength and differences between directional and bounced light sources.

BACKGROUND

Lighting will greatly depend upon the background setting of the painting and vice versa. Open areas; such as sky will have abundance of bounced hues and myriad of colours reflected around the subject.

A real Greek goddess

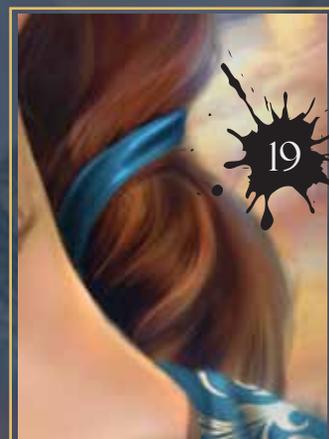
Create the style of the period



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HAIR HIGHLIGHTS

Hair just like a skin has many different hues. I gave my character an Auburn hair colour; therefore the highlights will be light, reddish brown. On the separate layer, using Bristle Brush, paint in the highlights most exposed to the light. Blur the ends of the highlights and use Dodge Tool to brighten the highlights if needed.



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STYLING DETAILS

Staying true to the period, as a final step I add hair ribbon to tie the hair in a fashionable style. This also adds to the overall richness and makes the whole image look more finished.



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PATTERN

Use reference materials to help you pick the right kind of pattern, significant to the period and the character. Here I used Greek Key pattern for the crown, the pattern of the shoulder fabric, and other ancient patterns to construct the pendant. Again, I used a Pen Tool to outline those patterns for cleaner, sharper look.



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FINE STRANDS

There are always some places where hair will get loose and strands will hang around the face. This is good to include as it creates more realistic look to the portrait and adds liveliness to the whole picture. Use Hard Round Brush and randomly paint in the strands one by one. Do it randomly with a very soft, fluid motion.



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DESIGN

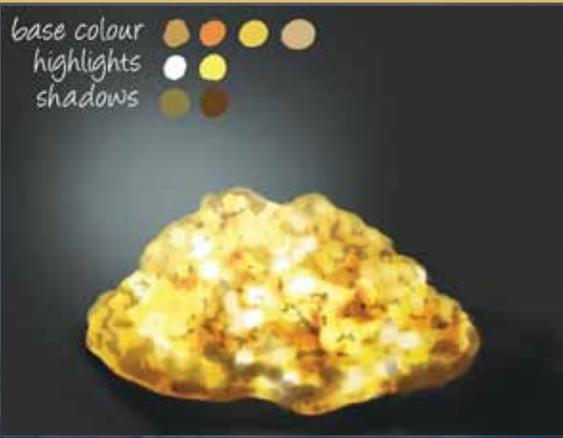
With the Hard Round brush, using some of the base colours from the palette, paint in the general shapes of the golden jewellery parts you want to include. It helps to generate some custom brushes for the certain parts of the jewellery; such as chain to speed up the process. Be aware of the dimension while you paint. Paint lights and darks accordingly.

WHAT ARE BOUNCED HUES?

Bounced hues are literally that; colors which have been bounced from one thing to another. In this case, a great example is the blue color cast from Athena's earring, which illuminates her neck and jawline. Colored objects, particularly shiny or reflective ones, cast their colors onto the surfaces around them, particularly under strong lighting. Making use of this knowledge is a great way to add both realism and tonal variation to the portrait piece.

REFLECTIVE METALS - BASICS

Any highly polished metal surface will reflect not only strong light but it will pick up all the colours of the surrounding objects, therefore we must be careful to include many bounced hues. The areas exposed to light will be very bright, almost glowing, however the ones in the shade will be very dark as a deep contrast.



TEXTURE

I am a very avid user of textures, as I think they add more realism to the painting. Metals all have texture generated from wear and age, so a nice scratched metal texture would work well. I used photographic texture, which I converted into a Custom Texture Brush (opacity set to 50%) with the Layer Mode to Overlay at 75% Opacity.

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PALETTE OF GOLD

Our eye may perceive gold to appear yellow but in true it is a mix of few different shades of warm greens, yellows, orange and beige. The highlights will be very bright yellow and white and the shadows will be mustard green and brown. Mid tones are all the colours that are reflected from other surfaces.

CUSTOM SKIN TEXTURING

Even though fare, porcelain skin does not need too much texturing, for the sake of realism it is good to add those natural bumps and blemishes. Use Dotted Brush with Spacing set to about 50% (or whatever suits your image). Adjust the Layer Blending modes and Opacity settings for the ultimate results.

IMPORTANCE OF CUSTOM BRUSHES

As a painter, you would always want to add something personal to your paintings. It's a good idea to invest some time in developing a selection of your own custom brushes to help you do this. It is a very rewarding process, and the one which will help you grow as an artist as well.



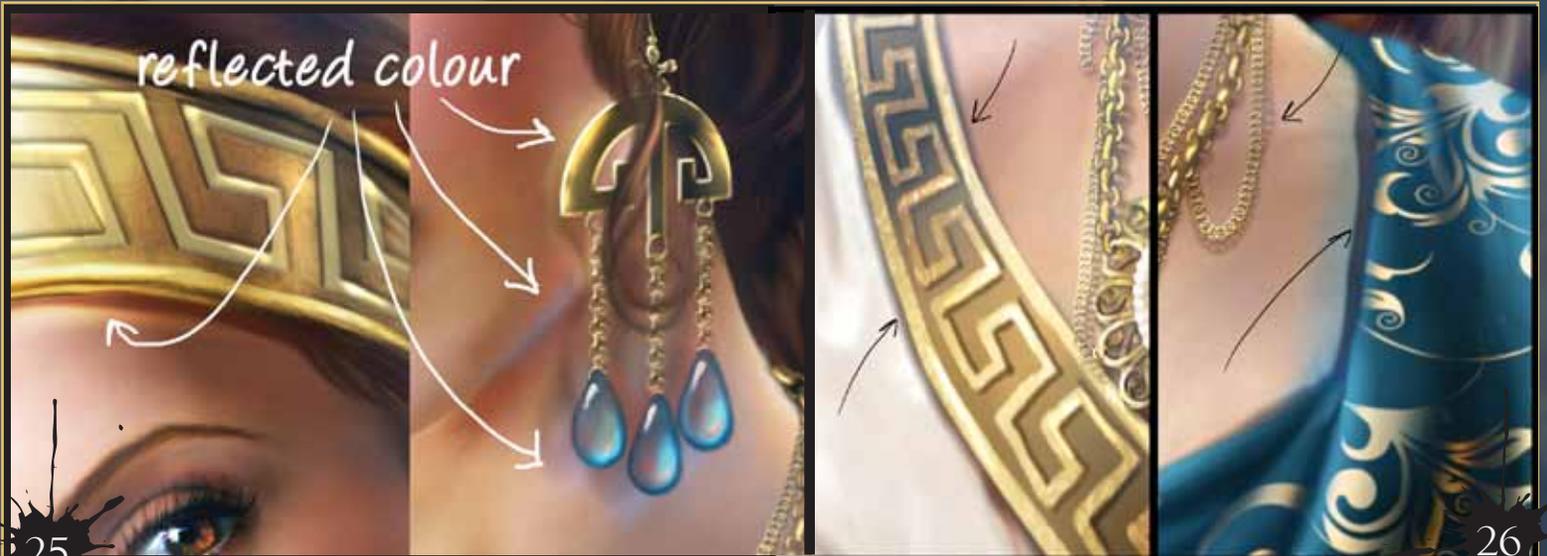
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EXTRAS

Adding additional texture here and there is always an added bonus when striving for realism in painting. Here I've used some real photo texture for the lips to give them more life. Also, I've gone an extra step to paint in veins that may be visual in parts of the body where skin is very thin and pale.

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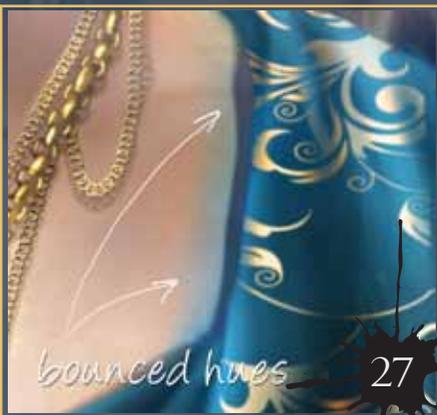
REFLECTIVE LIGHTING

Reflective materials such as gold, silver, bronze, etc will always bounce hues to the nearest surface. In this case, gold from the crown will cast some reflective light on the forehead, and the shine of the earring will bounce off of the chin bone. It is important to mention that colour will always be reflected from the gems and stones.

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CASTING SHADOWS

Every object will cast shadow opposite of its light source. This is a simple rule never to be ignored. The strength of the shadow will be determined by the strength of the light.



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BOUNCED HUES

Sometimes the colour of the clothing may cast some interesting hues on the skin depending on the type of fabric. The stronger the light, the stronger the bounced hues will be, as well as fabric with more

sheen to it, such as silk and brocade will bounce more colour. Since in this case, our lighting is diffused, hues are very mild and moderate.



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ICONOGRAPHY

Using certain cultural or historic motifs, emphasises the details about the character, place and era the painting is representing. Athena was a Goddess of wisdom, strength and craft amongst other things, and for this reason I've painted the flying Owl in the background to symbolize wisdom which she was known to represent.

EXPRESSION

Portrait should always tell us about the mood and the story in some ways. Facial expressions are one of the ways of telling the viewer about the state of mind our character is in.