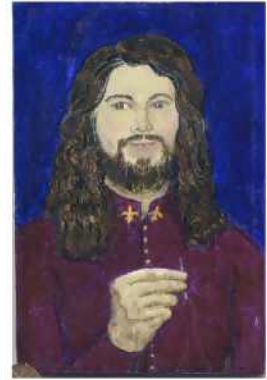


Tempera on Oak Panel Portrait

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1 Slaine ni Chiarain
Portrait of Jack of Banyard
A.S. XXXIX
Tempera on Oak. 15 x 15 cm.
Private Collection

Last winter I volunteered to do a Lily scroll for Jack of Banyard. I thought that a portrait and a writ would fit his persona. (The writ is not part of this entry.) I waited for the text and waited, and waited. I had thought it would be presented at Queen's Prize in Three Rivers at the end of January. I began prep work on the panel. Finally, on January 19th I got the go ahead on the scroll. I completed the writ first and on the Tuesday before the event I began the portrait. On Thursday evening I forced myself to stop.

This project wasn't as last minute as it might appear since it fit in with some of my other research. My first Queen's Prize entry mumble, mumble years ago was a portrait of my husband done in gouache on parchment. I'd been investigating panel painting because I'd like to make a triptych.

Sources

I aimed for the mid to late 15th century England in designing this painting. Tempera was still being used though oil was beginning to take over. Cennini's Handbook is one of the best sources for learning about period methods for tempera. There is a great deal of research on Italian painting of this time but not so much on England. Even experts have to extrapolate on the techniques of other regions. (Garland, 141) In the catalog I've gather many portraits based on style or materials used.

Preparing the Panel

The support for this portrait is an oak panel coated with hide glue, linen, and gesso. In Italy poplar was a popular choice for panels but oak and other woods were used in England and Northern Europe.

I prepared the glue by soaking 1 part glue flakes to 10 parts water. (Massey, 23) Rather than a double boiler I mixed up the glue in a plastic container sitting in the warm water. I had to stir it a lot to get it dissolve. I let it rest over night and ended up with a lot more glue than I intended. It was very much like Jello and had to be reheated for each use.

I painted the panel on all sides with the animal glue size. This sealed the wood and will hopefully prevent warping in the future. Then I soaked a piece of linen in the size and spread it over the panel. A linen layer survives on many period paintings and is mentioned by Vasari. (224) and Cennini (70)

Gesso

The gesso I used for this project is Fredrix brand which contains calcium carbonate, animal skin glue and titanium white. The only real change from the period *gesso sottile* that Cennini describes is the use of titanium instead of lead as whitening. I mixed it up as described on the package.

I had used this gesso several times as the base for gilding on scrolls but this was the first time I covered a panel with it. Getting the right consistency took some experimentation. For the first couple layers I had it too thick. It was the consistence of toothpaste and I had a hard time getting

ride of the brush ridges. When I sanded the ridges away I was almost down to the linen layer in spots. I decided to thin the gesso with water. I warmed up the gesso up the same way I made the animal skin glue. The gesso went on much smoother and with no brush stokes. I must have put on 5 or 6 layers. I let the gesso dry overnight and then sanded the surface to make it smooth. Cennini describes using some sort of hooks and knives to scrape the surface but I just used progressively fine sandpaper.(74) The outer edges of the linen and the gesso over lapped the edge of the board and had to be trimmed off.

Preliminary Drawings

Back in the day, a person would contract for a painting. The artist would make sketches of the recipient (on parchment or tinted paper) with notes about clothing and colors. (fig. 2) While he might have several prepared panels or canvases waiting for a commission, the actual work was done after talking with the subject.

I didn't have this luxury. When I took the assignment, I thought I had photos from the subject's wedding somewhere, I couldn't find them. I tired doing sketches from memory but just wasn't satisfied. Finally, I emailed Jack's wife Cara and asked if she had any pictures of him. She ended up walking in on him, taking a few pictures "to have at work" and emailing them to me. Fortunately, he was sewing at the time – just what I wanted to picture him doing. Unfortunately, his distinctive hair was pulled back.



2. Jean Clouet. Francis, Dauphin of France. ca.1523. black and red chalk on paper. 10.5 x 7 inches. Musee Conde, Chantilly

What I should have done was make sketches based on photos but first I made a digital collage with bits from each picture. I feel kinda bad about this. I've taught drawing in SCA and often have a sketchbook handy for doodling during court. (The first time I entered Kingdom A&S one of my projects was a period sketchbook done with silverpoint on tinted paper.) I made the collage the size I needed for the panel. At least, I used a period method of transferring the image to the panel! Cennini describes three different methods for making tracing paper. (Cennini, 13)

I painted with the collage handy and several books open to period portraits. One of Durer's self portraits was a good source for hair. (Later period oil paintings are very seductive, and I've included them because of certain elements of the design are similar but the look I was going for is the earlier, flatter looking images.)

Paint

I used tempera paint for this portrait. While I have dry pigments and have fiddled with them in the past I do not feel comfortable using them. I cannot isolate my workspace and I fear for the health of my curious cats. Therefore I used tube gouache as the



3. The artist's work area.

source for my pigments. I see this as skipping to the point where Cennini says “these colors ought always to be kept standing in a little chest, well covered up, always soaking and wet.” (Cennini, 39) Yes, there is still gum Arabic present but the resulting mixture behaves very different from gouache.

To make tempera take an egg and separate the white and the yolk. Try not to let the yolk sack get mixed into the yolk. Mix about half an eggshell of water in with the yolk.

I reserved the egg white and made glair as well. The white is beaten until it is stiff and dry. The liquid at the bottom of the bowl is glair.



I kept both the glair and the tempera in (well labeled) plastic containers in the fridge. Tempera needs preservatives or to be made fresh at each painting session. Some say glair works best when it is old and stinky. It works just fine when fresh.

Both tempera and glair are mixed on the palette with small amounts of pigment. I'd put a dab of paint on the palette and then add the egg solution from a dropper until it was a consistency I liked.

When I transferred the drawing to the panel I lightly incised the basic drawing into the surface of the gesso. Then I painted in the details with a thinned sepia paint. Modeling of the dark areas was worked up with small painted hatch marks.



Then I began to add in the color. At first I just blocked in the major areas with a thin layer of color. On the face in the early stage is a bit of terre verte. Cennini and other period writers mention this counter intuitive step in painting a face.

A big difference between working in gouache and tempera is that an egg binder sets much faster than a Gum Arabic binder. Therefore, one has to mix colors in small amounts and work quickly. If I needed to step away, I could gain a little time by covering my pallet with plastic wrap. The egg also gives the paint a sheen that you just don't see with gouache.



I had some trouble with the thicker dark areas such as the background. I kept getting white pin point dots. It didn't appear to be random flecks of gesso. I thought it might be minute holes in the gesso. I had problems using this gesso at first when gilding because I stirred it too vigously leaving air bubbles. These holes were much smaller. Painting extra layers eventually took care of the white dots.

As I painted in finer and finer details I needed to mix in a little glair with the tempera.

Varnish

Since the portrait was being given away so quickly after it was completed there wasn't any good way to varnish it. Cennini suggests using glair to give the illusion of varnish on a new painting. (Cennini, 99). Other wise, he says to wait at least a year. I recently obtained some lumps of damar

3. a b c Three stages in the creation of this painting.

to make into a varnish but I'll have to see if Jack will let me have the picture back in a year.

The Frame

Please do not judge the frame. They rarely survive from period so it's difficult to know what would have been used to protect this painting.

The final assessment.

I am very pleased with this portrait. Despite the short deadline and the quality of the photos I was sent I feel I captured the likeness of the subject. I really liked working with tempera. The body and translucency of the paint made for a very different painting experience but a very enjoyable one.

I'm less happy that the surface of the painting is so uneven. With all I had read about tempera in Thompson's books and online I don't recall any mention of what the surface is supposed to be like. In museums, tempera painting always have texture but I always thought that was an age thing. I regret adding in the fleur-de-lis on the collar. It was a last minute decision when I thought there should be some reference to it being part of his Calon Lily. I also wished I smoothed out his hand more. When I showed this to my sister she didn't like how I'd done his mouth. Perhaps I should have done it with lips closed but I work in a dental library in real life and felt compelled to attempt teeth.

Supplies

Item	Use	Periodness	Supplier
Oak panel	support	Used in England	Lowes
Rabbit skin glue	To seal wooden panel	Cennini	London, L. Cornelissen & Sons on Great Russel St.
Linen	Layer between the panel and the gesso	Mentioned by Cennini and Vasari	Probably Fashion Fabrics in St. Louis
Frederik Gesso	Ground	For a commercial gesso it is very period. It contains calcium carbonate, animal skin glue and titanium white (rather than lead)	Art Mart in St. Louis
Pigments		I mainly used gouache – limited palette to colors available then	Various
Eggs	binder	Yes	Whole Foods – happy free range hens
Brushes		I use purchased sable brushes #4 and a #00	

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