



Marc Chatov offered insights to improve works brought to a PSA critique session.

Marc Chatov Critique

April 30, 2013 at the Spruill Center

By Don Meadows

A critique is a shared experience that should benefit those who attend, as well as the artist whose work is being considered. It should be instructive and constructive rather than ego-based.

On April 30, 2013, Portrait Society of Atlanta Advisory Board Member Marc Chatov met all those criteria as he critiqued works brought to the Spruill Center by PSA members. During the evening, he gave condensed lessons in anatomy and techniques that can lead to better portraiture.

One rule in art is that the drawing or painting has to “work,” Chatov said. “If it’s beautifully executed, but still doesn’t touch me, then the amount of skill used doesn’t impress me,” he said. And if it doesn’t work, the question becomes, why not?

To be a portrait, though, the rendering also needs to be correct. A good understanding of anatomy – the bones, muscles, and tissue below the skin – enhances an artist's ability to produce an accurate portrait.

Children, and even adults, often represent eyes as almond- or fish-shaped. Instead, think of the eye as a ball, Chatov suggested. He uses various facial elements as landmarks to position and develop the eyes. He uses the bottom lids to align the eyes, for example. In general, the distance from one tear duct to the other is about the width of an eye.

When working on a portrait, Chatov quickly locates the zygomatic arch (cheek bone) to establish the side planes of the face, then the mandible (jaw bone) and the masseter muscle that connects the two.

Draw the skull, Chatov urged. Get a plastic skull, he suggested, paint it with a wash of raw umber, then wipe it when the paint is half dry so that color remains in the creases.

Although he encourages artists to draw (a lot) from life, Chatov acknowledges that many artists use photographs as reference for their artwork. To minimize distortion, he suggested being at least 10 feet away from the subject when taking reference photographs. For two-dimensional work, Chatov cautioned against using more than one reference image. To spot key features, it might also help to do a cartoon or quick sketch of the sitter before starting the painting.

Chatov generally scales his portraits to be three-quarters life size, and his reference image – either printed or scaled to match on a computer screen – will be the same size. Some artists mark a grid on a copy of their reference image to use as a guide in transferring the image to canvas, some use Plexiglas or a wire frame as a viewing aid.

Chatov also recommended memory drawing as a

practice that can help increase an artist's awareness and knowledge of anatomy. He recalled an art class where the students sat staring at a model, but didn't start drawing until the model had left the room. Periodically, the model would return and take up the same pose. The students would then check the accuracy of their drawings, and the process repeated. During his own art school days, Chatov had to memorize and correctly draw (without looking) the bones of the skeleton.

Like plein air painters, portrait artists benefit from being able to look at a scene and hold it in their mind's eye to compensate for changing situations.

Perhaps more of a challenge is to learn to critique your own work. "Listen to the inner artist," Chatov said. Sometimes artists get to a point in a painting where they "work something to death," circling around the face, making adjustments to get the eye right. If you reach that point, the best thing to do is turn the canvas to the wall and work on something different, Chatov suggested. Often, if you have a problem you can't immediately resolve, the best solution can be to clear your mind: set the brush down, sit down, and relax, he said.

Sometimes the challenge in creating a portrait is that we know too much about a person or have an emotional attachment that colors our vision. With family members, for example, you have to not see the relationship, Chatov said. "Let the artist do the work."

Another obstacle artists encounter is "painter's block." Chatov described several methods to overcome creative dry spells. He said he uses "morning pages," as described in *The Artist's Way*, by Julia Cameron, as a way to "grease the machine."

"Painting is sacred," Chatov said. Treat your studio like a shrine, he said. "You have to invite the muse," he said. "It is my firm belief that there is a creative spirit." Your studio

should be a place where you can create without distraction or interruption. No bills, no emails, no chatty phone calls. The people he invites into his studio (in spirit) include Leonardo da Vinci, Velasquez, Joaquin Sarolla... "my old ones, my masters, my teachers," he said. But no ego.

"Empty the cup, stand in front of the canvas, and see what happens," he said.