

# VISUALLY ABSTRACTED SHAPES

TO DRAW OR PAINT REALISTICALLY, LEARN TO SEE ABSTRACT SHAPES



*A portrait (and detail) of Nancy Astor by John Singer Sargent. Sargent is an excellent painter to study if you wish to understand the visual impression that can be created through shapes of tone and colour. Look at the simple abstract shapes of light and dark, particularly in the hair. The result is a convincing illusion of hair, more so than if it was depicted by thousands of long thin lines, which is how we think of hair.*



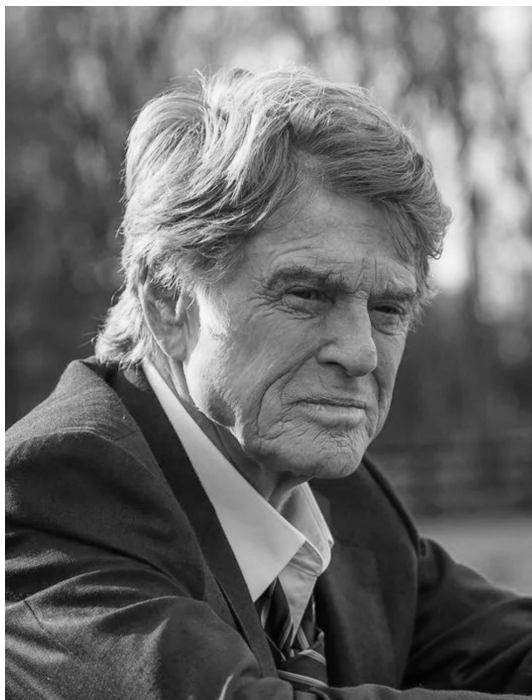
Imagine you were beginning a portrait based on this photograph of the left. The first example on the shows a simplified drawing if we approached it 'literally', ie, outlining the features around their physical extents. The example on the right shows a simplified 'abstract shape' approach, where the face is not broken down according to the physical features, but according to the abstract shapes of light and dark. This lays the foundation for a much more convincing depiction, which more closely resembles our visual impression of the subject.

We need to train ourselves to learn to use our visual sense alone. Because our sense of sight is so intrinsically linked to our sense of touch, when we look at an object we see its edges as being the physical extents of that object. And consequently, because we can see it's physical extents, we then know where to put our hand in order to grasp the object and pick it up. But, from a purely visual point of view alone, an edge is NOT the physical boundaries of an object, an edge is the boarder between shapes of tone and colour. For example, imagine a collar of a shirt or jacket. When it is folded back against the same material, the collar will obviously still have a physical edge, but VISUALLY, it often will not. (See the 'lost' edge of the collar on the right).

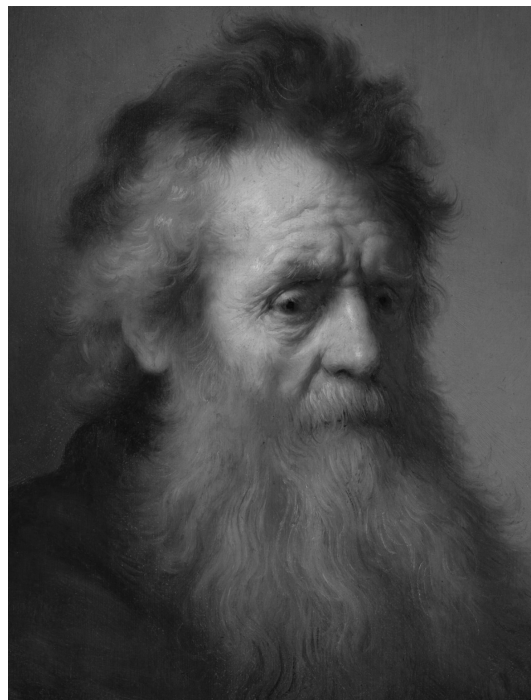


The basis of this idea of Visual Abstraction is a simple enough - once you have understood it! Communicating it though can be difficult, and also training yourself to see - and think - in those terms can also be difficult. A three dimensional object projected onto a flat, two dimensional picture plane will create an arrangement of flat 'abstract' shapes of tone and colour.

Below are two excellent portraits. One is a photograph (unfortunately I don't know the photographers name), the other a painting by Rembrandt. Both portraits depict similar subjects and not dissimilar expressions. Yet comparing the photograph to the painting, the painting certainly does have a quite different aesthetic, and the photograph looks very flat by comparison. With no disrespect to the photographer, this aesthetic does, in my opinion, give the painting a much more emotive, imaginative and atmospheric feeling. Why?



*Photograph*

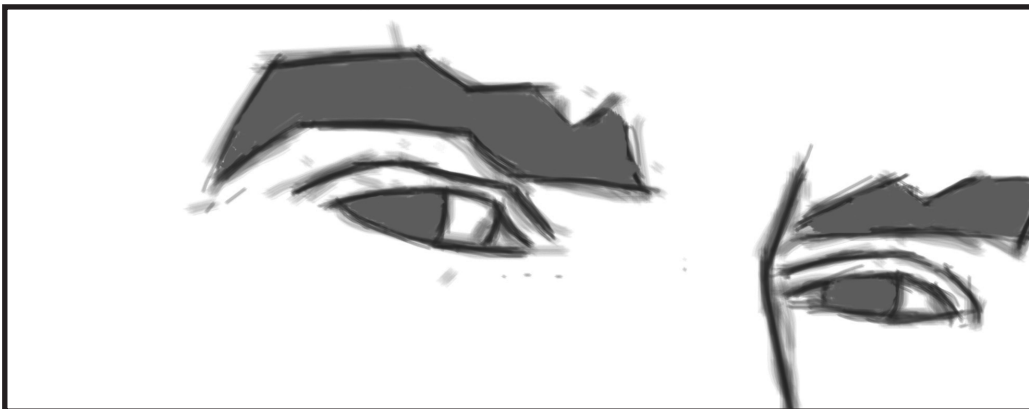
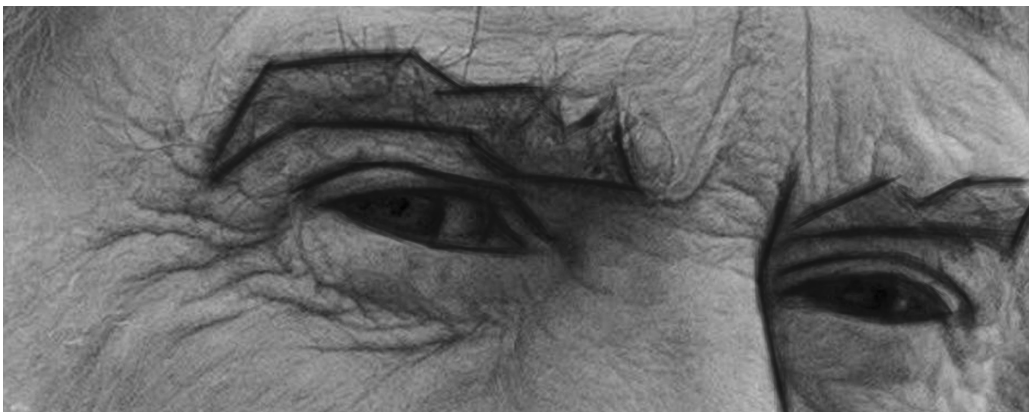


*Painting*

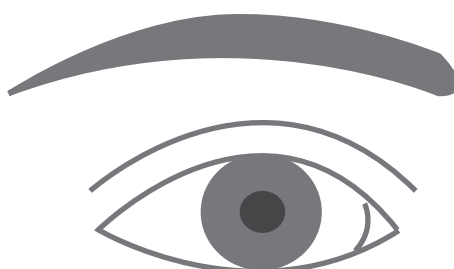
I think there are many reasons (Rembrandt's tonal choices, colour palette and knowledge of form will create a unique aesthetic). But more fundamentally to that, I think there is major difference in the way the photograph presents shapes to us, and the way Rembrandt has presented shapes to us. If we look at just the eyes:



Now, if we were to attempt to draw the eyes simply by referring to the photograph, and following the idea of what we think eyes look like, we might get something like this. A quite literal interpretation:



This depiction is a result of drawing what we think we as humans see, not what we actually see. The result is not too dissimilar to a cartoon symbol of an eye which might be something like this:





Now, if we study the shapes of the eyes the way that Rembrandt has presented them to us, we'll see that the shapes are not really how we think of eyes at all.

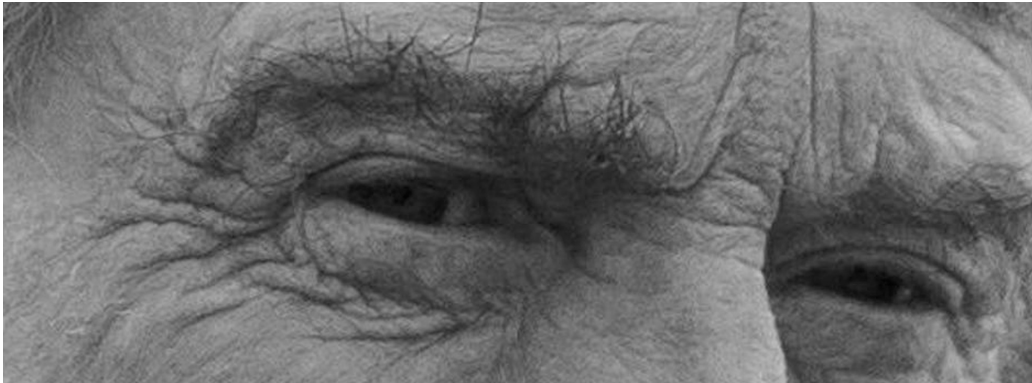


The eyes have been abstracted into shapes of tone (light and dark). They are not really realistic at all, at least not how we might think of realism. We forfeit what we think an eye looks like (which is influenced by our knowledge of the physical extents - or anatomy - of an eye) and create shapes based solely on how it visually appears. This is what I mean by visual abstraction. Certain important parts of the eye are barely even shown (such as the tear duct). But the shapes that are shown have such clarity, that we can deduce that the tear duct is there, even though we can barely see it.

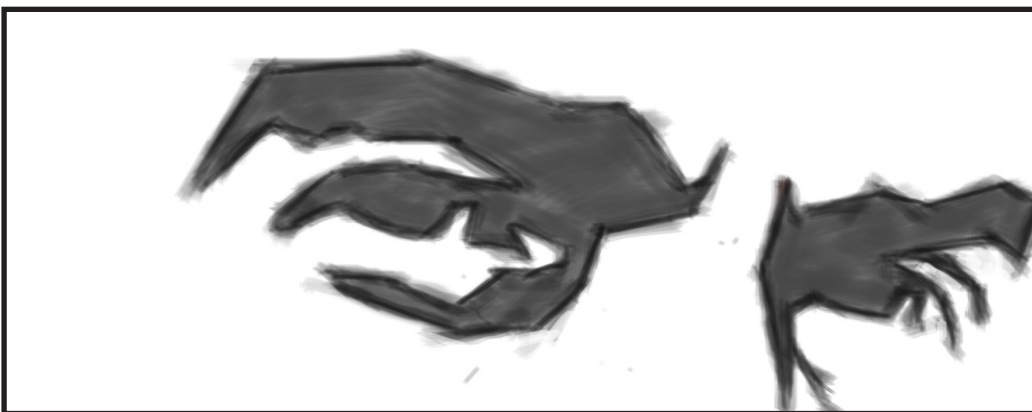
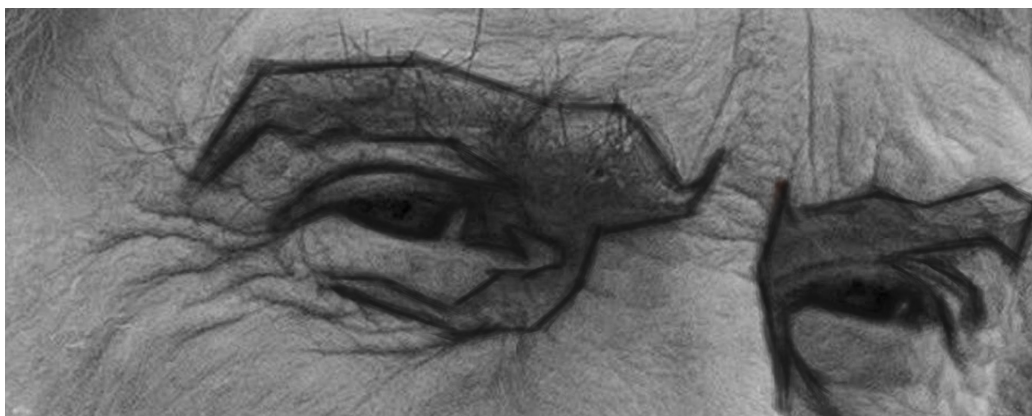




So, if we were going to use the previous photograph to refer to in order to help us paint a portrait, we have to therefore interpret it. Not copy it. We have to discard superfluous information, and create abstract shapes. Perhaps along these lines shown below. Squinting helps during this process!!



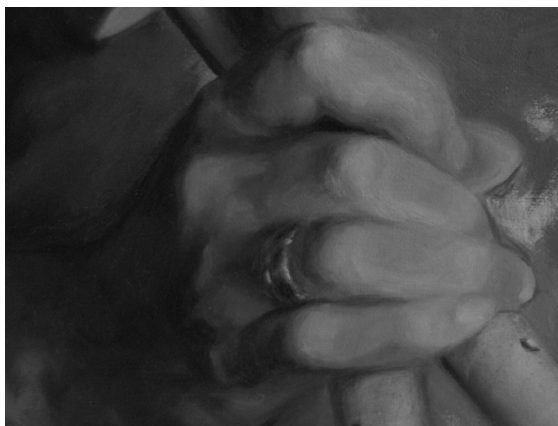
So the shapes you abstract might be closer to this:



Rather than this more 'literal' depiction which is what we had before:



The depiction of fingers might be a good subject to try to illustrate this idea more fully. If we drew a hand as we think of it literally, we might get a disk shape with five individual sausage shapes sticking out of it for fingers. Each finger thought about as it's own physical entity, with its physical extents depicting its boundary. Whereas, if we think of a hand in terms of abstract shapes, it allows us to unify fingers into a collective if they are pressed together, and separate them as individual fingers if they are spread. The result is something that appears visually as a much more naturalistic and convincing hand.



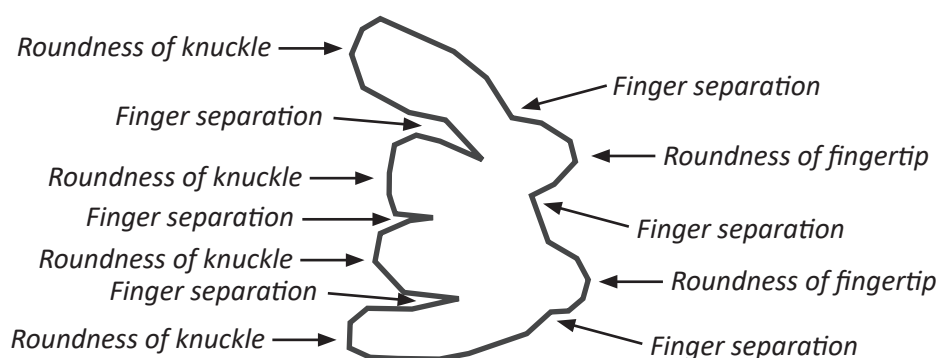
Here is an example of a hand, that hopefully looks naturalistic. This has been achieved in part by thinking of the fingers collectively (they are unified through visually abstracted shapes) rather than as each finger being their own individual entity.



If I reduce it to just two tones of light and dark, it's easier to see the largest abstract shapes at their most basic level. See how the shapes unify the fingers, there is no gap between them. These basic shapes are not tied to each individual finger, but define the collective or group of fingers. What I'm trying to suggest is that an abstract shape will create a convincing visual impression of the fingers, whereas a 'literal' interpretation will define each finger individually, and consequently, the fingers will appear 'overstated' and lose their natural appearance in the context of the image.



If you try to look just within the shape I have indicated in the finished painting, you can see that the tones used to separate the fingers within that larger basic shape are so subtle, and in many places the fingers are basically fused together. There is not really any clear defining line or shape that separates them.



Now obviously fingers are their own individual entity. But this can be communicated through the drawing of your abstract shapes. I have tried to point out how the impression of individual fingers can be communicated through the design of an abstract shape.

Why is this important? Firstly it is much closer to how we as humans actually see, as when light enters our eye, it casts shapes on our retina. Therefore by mimicking this we can create a stronger sense of visual realism. It is our brain that later adds the other associations created by our sense of touch.

But secondly, if you were to merely copy what you think you are seeing, that is when the result will be a mere literal interpretation. Whereas if you are able to shift your thinking into abstract terms, you are then presented with a limitless number of choices of how to treat every one of those shapes. You are not constrained by your photographic reference (if that is what you are using). You could brighten the shape, darken the shape, sharpen it, soften it, increase its colour, decrease its colour, all to varying degrees. This will have the effect of bringing the shape to the fore, or pushing it back, in relation to all the other shapes in the picture. It is just an abstract shape, yours to do with what you will. The only limiting factor is your own creativity. Obviously in order to maintain the illusion of reality, constraints must be applied to keep it within the realm of believability. But those constraints apply more to constraining the relationships between shapes, rather than what you do to the shape itself. For example, if you are painting flesh (which is normally pinkish), you can, if you wanted, take one of your abstracted shapes and paint it green. On it's own, that will look wrong. But if you painted all the abstracted shapes of the flesh the same degree of green, it will look correct - as if the skin is just illuminated by green light.

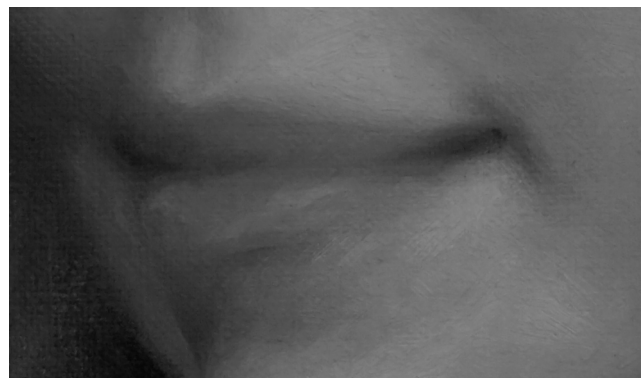
You are also presented with an opportunity to add a degree of sophistication in the way you paint (or don't paint) certain things. For example, you can leave certain things out, in order for the viewer to complete the picture themselves. A bit like a joke, where one has to connect the dots before they get the joke. You can use abstract shapes to give your viewer A and B, and they work out C on their own. The tear ducts in the Rembrandt painting above is a good example of this.

Here is a portrait where I tried to explore my own understanding of this idea. It can all be pushed further, this is just my attempt. Hopefully I can use it to help me communicate what I am trying to say.

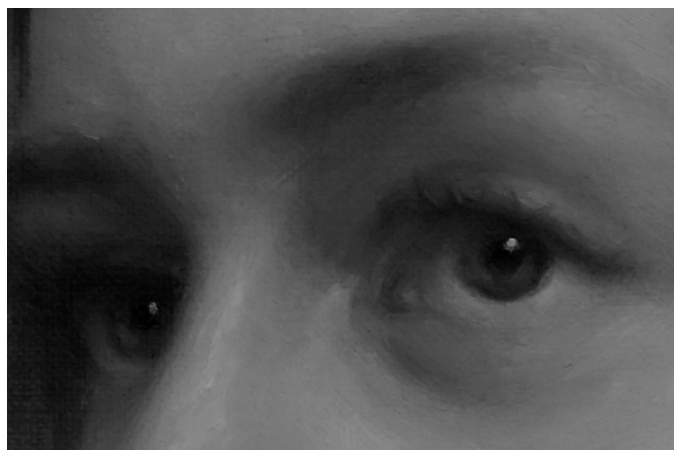




This painting was painted using a photo reference. The key word here being reference. The goal was never to copy it. Below I have shown the mouth, with the photo on the left and the painting on the right. I tried hard to show as little of the part between the lips as possible. I tried to communicate it just using the dark shadow shapes at the corners of the mouth, and also the subtle highlight shape on the lower lip. As much as possible, I tried to keep the upper and lower lips as one unified shape. I like to think that when the painting is viewed as a whole, the part in the lips is not seen as 'missing' - as the viewer has hopefully completed the picture in their mind.



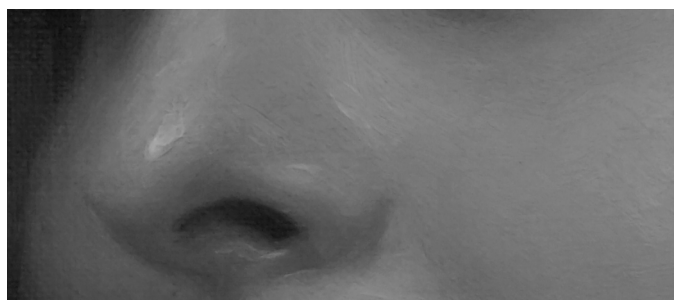
Also in the eyes, I tried to eliminate what wasn't necessary, and bring out what was. For example, I removed the lower eyelid/eyelashes, unified certain shadows (see below), softened the crease of the upper eyelid, reduced the prominence of the eyelashes, toned back the eyebrow to a suggestion, and simplified the highlight in the eye and on the bridge of the nose.

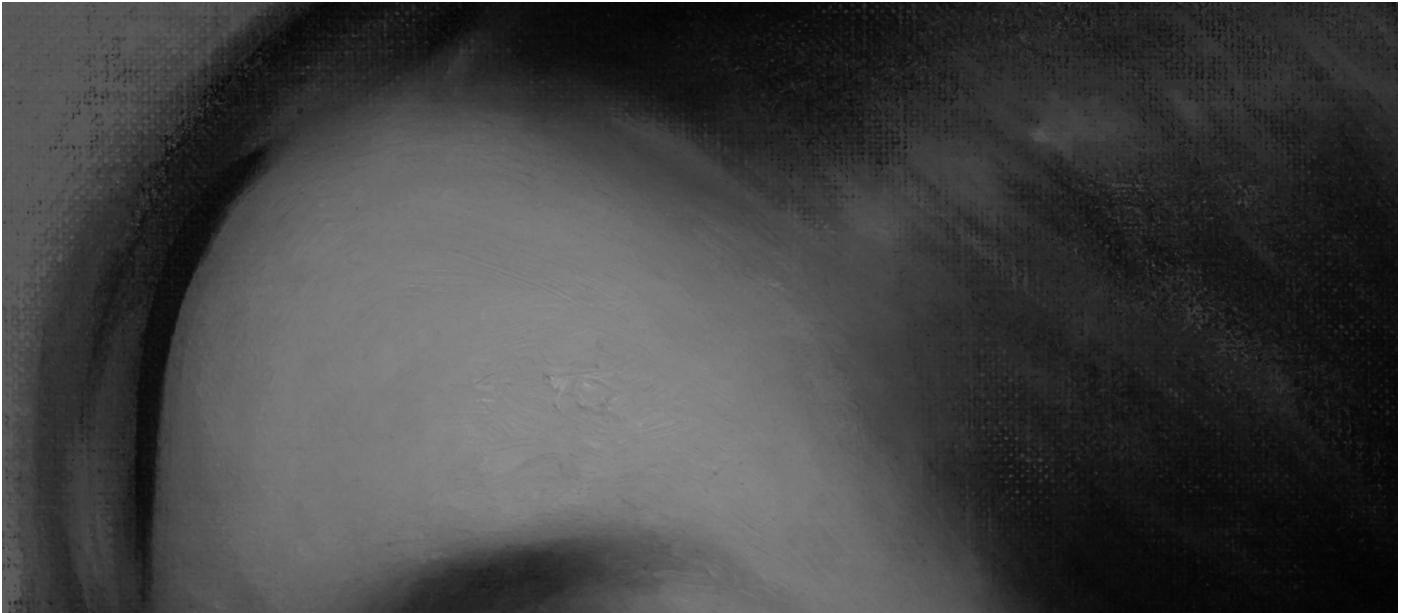


*This simplified image shows abstract shapes of varying degrees of value, often unifying across physical boundaries of forms. For example, the shape defining much of the iris is connected and unifies with the shadow on the upper eyelid using a single tonal value, which creates an abstract shape. The pupil and upper eyelid are unified into a single shape, and the cheek and lower eyelid are unified with the white of the eye. A bit like the unification of fingers in the earlier example. This deliberate unification of shapes helps move our thinking from literal to abstract.*



Here I have tried to paint the end of the nose by completely unifying it with the far cheek, and relying on the shadow shape under the nose and the highlight shape on the tip of the nose, to complete the end of the nose, which isn't actually shown.





Here in the forehead I have tried to show the different treatment of abstract shapes to communicate different things. In the first instance, nothing here actually looks like hair, although I hope that when viewed as a whole it does. The dark shape made by the shadow accent down the front of the forehead makes a sharp edge, to communicate the bone of the forehead. Contrast this with the much softer transition from the forehead into the hair, where the forehead shape and hair shape are fused through that very soft transition. This deliberate decision was made to communicate the fact that bone = hard, and hair = soft. Other ideas can be communicated, such as a prominent shape = clarity (such as the highlight shapes). Unified shapes = atmosphere or mystery (such as the shadow shapes). I'm not satisfied that a photograph ever really communicates these distinctions, which is why I encourage you to always interpret them - not copy them.

I was aided in these decisions first by thinking in terms of abstract shapes. I then asked myself what I wanted the shape to communicate, and making decisions on how I treated the shape accordingly. So, if you were to study each shape individually, I wouldn't say that these shapes are realistic, they are more abstract. They are not intended to be a literal depiction of the thing they represent. But I hope that when viewing the painting as a whole, the abstract shapes work together to create a sense of realism that is heightened beyond that of the reference photograph, as deliberate creative decisions have been made to each shape that hopefully better communicate my perception of the sitter.

So to sum up, my opinion is that the best path to realism is not a literal depiction of things. If that's all a painting seeks to do, then I sympathise with the criticism that realist painting receives: 'why not just take a photograph?' But through a creative treatment of visually abstracted shapes, more life, vitality, emotion, beauty and expression can be achieved, and therefore a greater sense of realism - from our human perception - is possible. And that is, I believe, a big part of why realism in painting remains so engaging.