

Oil Portrait tutorial by Cynthia Blair



I'm using a scene from Fellowship of the Ring, (movie, 2001) to demo. I'll be radically changing colors from my photo reference (next page).
at left is the finished painting of Elijah Wood as Frodo.

Open Canvas technique: starting with a transparent underpainting, and leaving areas of it uncovered whatever other techniques are used. It can be used with the build-up/ tonal approach, or with wet-on-wet brushwork on top; or with scumbling and glazing layers on top. The important thing with "open canvas," is that *the underpainting itself is a dominant feature*. Open canvas also tends to utilize **scumbling and glazing** as a primary application tool, rather than only as an adjustment tool.

Materials:

panel primed with gesso, tinted warm golden tan
Brushes: Utrecht white nylon flats, in sizes 1,2, 4, 6, 8
turpenoid or turp
palette knife for color mixing
paper disposable palette

oil colors used in this painting:

Titanium white
Naples Yellow
Cadmium Yellow Med
Yellow Ochre
Vasari Shale (dk purplish brown mix- can substitute Van Dyke Brown, etc.)
French Ultramarine blue
Cadmium Red medium
Alizarin
Red Umber

Note: each session is approx 2-3 hours for this size portrait, which is 15" x 20" On the last session I may spend much more time balancing and making final corrections. but each step is important.

A completed oil painting usually takes me about 3-4 days to complete, with drying time in-between.

Before Starting: I tint my panel with a light soft warm tan, a color which will compliment my subject's skin color. You can tint with any color- or no color except white – just realize that if you're not starting with white you will be incorporating the tint color into your painting. White is really the best for the base of sparkling crisp colors, for it reflects their luminosity. Oil paints can be transparent or opaque and varying degrees in between; this takes some getting used to.



Session 1: Transparent Underpainting

After selecting my reference photo (at left), I have roughed in a charcoal sketch, and fixed it so that it won't smudge when I start painting over it. Notice I have mapped out where all the main features belong and the correct shapes. This is critically important! I might double check my measurements several times, because doing corrections later is more difficult.

note: working from web photos and film stills are difficult, it is best to work from a model or at least a high quality photo!



I start "drawing" now with my #2 or #4 brush, soft and loosely applying the paint *thinly*. I am using a mix transparent dark brown and ultramarine. These are the colors I use instead of black. I never, ever use black – it's just a personal thing of mine, but I find black is such a dead color. I pay attention to the lights and darks and block these in.

In this first session (about an hour or two) I'll push the paint around with my brush, darken areas, and remove paint with a Q-tip dipped in turp where I decide it needs lightening. Use the least amount of turp as you can for this, and the paint should be applied in a thin layer (we'll be building it up more as we go along). I'll be very careful to get the shape of his eyes and his other features correctly, however. Once I get a decent likeness going in monochrome, I'll let it dry completely before the next session, where I start adding colors.

Session 2 : adding color



The first thing I do in this session is to mix all the basic skin tones I will be working with on my palette. I use a limited palette on purpose, to keep my color harmony. I'll start with my palette knife and a pile of white paint and slowly add alizarin, cad red, yellow ochre and cad yellow in small amounts. This is my base value, and is the warmest lightest colors in the skin tone range. I'll compare it to my ref photo to see if the color is harmonious; though I might change it up a bit. I divide this pile of base color, and add a bit of extra alizarin to it, this will be my warm pink for cheeks and nose areas, etc. Next I'll take some of the rosier color I just mixed and add some darker colors, maybe some ultramarine and the dark brown, maybe a bit of yellow ochre in tiny amounts until they look correct...these will be my "shadow" colors, which are still based on the original skin tone but darkened. Again, I'll compare this color to the shadow side of his face.

Note: I always mix my colors with a palette knife, and clean and dry my brush on a paper towel in between color changes.

Getting the color right takes practice in mixing! Add tiny amounts of color to tint white. Remember that white "cools" a color, so often I will add some Naples yellow to counteract that tendency. I spent a lot of time mixing the wrong colors and making mud (and still do!) but with practice you become more accurate.

Again, my paint application is thin and semi-opaque. Now I start blocking in my colors and sculpting the form of his face. This is the most important area (focal point!) to get right, so I do this first, starting in the eye area on the light side. His left eye is deeply shadowed and difficult to see correctly from a screen cap, so it's best to start with what I can observe with accuracy. I start with my base (more yellowish) skin tone, and shift to my pink-er tones and eventually work on the shadow side of his face, which is a bit harder. Notice where the lightest highlights are: directly under his eye, the bridge

and tip of his nose, his upper lip above, his lower lip on the right side and the lower corners of his mouth. Also his cheekbone and where the bone of his outer brow shows.

If you think the eyebrows are not so important, think again! Make your brushstrokes follow the way the hair grows! Same goes for hair. Hair, even curly hair, follows the shape of the head. In this image we have light coming from 2 different directions, one light(from the left side) is much warmer and stronger, the #2 light(from the right side) is more of a backlight and cooler in color. So the curls catch the light and also follow and define to shape of his head! Observe your photo carefully, paint what you see, not what you **think** you should see!

After I'm content with his face, I'll finish his hair, then his clothes. I'm still leaving everything fairly loose, not too many details. I'm mainly concerned with accurately sculpting the form in paint, so I'm starting to get the 3 dimensional quality. I'll let this dry completely (usually just overnight) before adding another (and final) layer.

Session 3: Layering more color, adding shadows



Now I start adding in more color, refining the shapes and forms. As my reference photo is rather poor and colorless (see it here) I want to liven up the color with a greater range, get rid of that very blue cast. It is a challenge, working with a poor photo, but not impossible. I'm going to bring in more golden colors, as Lothlorien is the Golden Wood. My golden tint under the painting will help this, because I'm going to let a lot of this show through. The bottom area of Frodo's shirt will be very loosely suggested.

His expression is one of awe and apprehension as he approaches Galadriel, the great elf-queen, so I see mixed emotions on his face. One side of his face is deeply shadowed, especially in the eye area.

I continue to fill in color, working every area together as much as possible. At this point it's about corrections and adjustments. I'm working with flat brushes #1 to #4 at this point. I keep one dry brush just to "soften" edges and color transitions.

Session 4: Correcting and refining



After adequate drying time, Now I start measuring and correcting – I find some important things off, such as the line of his cheek on the shadow side, His jawline on the shadow side, the shirt collar which sticks out too far, his shadow side eyebrow which looks too stern.

I'll go over every area that catches my eye and perhaps turn the painting and the reference photo upside down and compare shapes and relative values until I'm satisfied.

At this point I'll add my lightest lights and darkest darks, and go over his hair again, adding reddish highlights. I'm not using the same colors as in the photo so I must be careful to keep correct grayscale values! I keep the light side of Frodo's face warmer in tone, the shadowed side cooler. I've changed the colors pretty radically from the photo!

Finally finished! (at least I think so, at this point.) *Final photos are shot, outside in ambient bright light, using a tripod and a cable shutter release to avoid any camera "shake". I find that even outdoor lighting is best, on an overcast day (or at least out of any direct sunlight).*

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