

# Painting a Portrait using Watercolor

## By Nancy Buckingham, Art Instructor

### Franklin Carmichael Art Group

The following tutorial details some tips and tricks I used to paint a portrait of a man named Yurek. I will also cover drawing, going back to basics with your brushes and much more. I hope you find it helps you on your art journey.

Feel free to share this tutorial with others.

All photos are at the end.

#### Color Chart for Skin Tones

I find it very helpful to have a color chart made from the colors currently in my palette. One of the color charts I referred to when I made mine used Daniel Smith paints.

It is not necessary to have all the colors I have on my chart (see below). I only used about 6 of the mixes for my portrait. A painting with a limited palette will have a more cohesive look.

#### Color Substitutions

Since I don't have many of the Daniel Smith colors, I made substitutions. For example, to make pyrrol scarlet, I mixed Winsor Red and a little Alizarin Red. For Hansa Yellow Deep, I used Winsor Yellow. My mixes are in brackets.

#### Have Fun Creating a Skin Tone Chart for Yourself!

Just make a variety of mixes from the warm or cool yellow, red and browns from your palette. Next, pick and choose the color mixes that closely match your reference photo.

Tip: A hole in a piece of paper can isolate a color that you may not see right away.

#### Drawing the Face

For the portrait of Yurek, I decided to lightly draw his face with an HB pencil and then paint on top. Do not draw any shading or too many details, save that for the paint.

Tip: When painting, add details after you are happy with the placement of where the features sit.

### Imagine Lines Running through the Face

When I am looking at a face, trying to get a good likeness, a helpful tip is to imagine a horizontal or vertical line running through it. I will then look to see what are the landmark spots I see running through that line.

A good example is when an imagined horizontal line shows me the top of an ear is level with the eyes. If the head is at an angle, I may see that one eye is bigger than the other or have different highlights in it.

Note: Looking at shapes, lining things up is important to get a feel for the person's face.

### Trick the Eye to not See the Face

A human face can sometimes be daunting to draw. A helpful way to make the drawing easier is to instead, see it not as a face, but as a series of shapes and values.

To do this, I take my reference photo and turn it sideways or upside down and look at it alongside my upside down drawing. By comparing the two in this way, it is so much easier to see how the shapes compare to each other and make any adjustments needed. This is one of my favorite techniques to help me correct a drawing.

### 5 Tips for Painting Better Portraits

- 1. Check the length of the Nose.** It is often drawn too long.
- 2. Distance between Eyes.** The width of an eye is almost the same as the space in between the eyes. Be careful you don't place the eyes too far apart.
- 3. Placement of Ear.** A common problem is to place the ear too high (or too low) on the face. An ear placed too high could lead to a problem with having an elongated neck.
- 4. Position of Neck.** The neck length can often be drawn too long and the shoulders too low. Check the distance between the chin to the shoulder line.
- 5. Shape of Jaw.** If the jawline is too rounded or has too many curves, it could give it a caricature cartoon look. A structured and strong angled jaw is more lifelike.

### Look at your Work in a Mirror

Another way to help you see your work through fresh eyes is to look at it in a mirror. When you do this, you will be using a different part of your brain to see it.

When I am stuck and I know something is wrong and I just can't figure out what it is, I hold it up to a mirror. Almost always I will find myself looking at the problem area and then sit down and make the correction.

### Visualize the Placement of your Stroke Before you Begin

I will make a mental note of where a color is going to be placed both horizontally and vertically on the face before I paint it.

Eg. It may begin at the same height as the base of an ear and go diagonally from the middle of the eye to the edge of the mouth.

If I know exactly where I want a color to be before I paint it, then my stroke will be more **intentional and fluid**. When I paint in this way, I am almost always happier with my work which results in a better finished painting.

### Make Use of a Master

When I was near the end of my painting, I still wasn't happy with the eyes. I pulled out my books with portraits done by Master Artists and looked at them for inspiration. Doing this helped me to see that I needed to not only adjust the eye shape but the color. The left iris was too big and the white around the irises were too white.

Tip: Add flesh colors to the white around the iris for a more natural look.

### Studies can bring Confidence

Try making a study from a portrait of a Master that you appreciate. Pick a portrait that you connect with and study the details of shape and form while you draw/paint it. The goal of a study for me is to help me to "**see more deeply**".

Note: A study can be very small and have few details and still be a very useful tool for your artistic growth.

Attached is a photo of a study I made from Dutch artist Hans Holbien. I was drawn to the eyes which I found intriguing. For a challenge, I made my study with pen and ink. I gained a new level of confidence by choosing to not worry about any potential errors and reminded myself that "**it is only paper!**"

**\*Remember art is a process and everything you make will help you become a better artist!**

### Make Sure your Stroke is a Good One then Let it Dry

A good tip for painting with watercolor is to know when to stop. What I mean is, if you spend too much time working on an area without letting it dry then you run the risk of overworking it. What I tried to do was to paint an area, check it for errors then don't touch it again until it is thoroughly dry.

If you don't catch the error right away, then it is best to let it dry completely before making the correction.

### Wet on Wet Timing

If you are working using a wet on wet technique, stop painting and let it dry when the paper is 30 percent dry. The reason for this is you may begin to get a cauliflower effect which is when the paint you just added spreads out the paint on the paper and looks like a blossom. One way to negate this is to match the level of wetness on your brush to the wetness on the paper.

### Control Your Water

Check that you have the right amount of water on your brush before you put the paint on the paper. Nothing is more frustrating than when I think I am going to add a fine detail and a splash of too much water flows where it's not wanted.

### Scrap Paper

I keep a piece of less expensive paper handy to test colors and levels of wetness as needed. Using scrap paper has saved me more than once.

### Color Continuity

When I am adding a new color I need to put that mix everywhere it appears throughout the face for continuity. That means that my brush will potentially be skipping around the face adding that color in a uniform way.

The mistake would be to use that color on one part of the face then run out of it and have to mix more, which could cause a lopsided effect.

Tip: A fix for this would be to make a larger pool of paint before you begin.

### Brush Size

Use your bigger brushes for bigger areas. It will help with a more uniform look. Imagine looking at a cheek with many visible small brush strokes or one with less.

The small brushes are for details only.

### Brush Choice

I used a larger round brush for the bigger areas. One time I accidentally picked up a round brush with a point and accidentally created a pointy line on Yureks cheek. I immediately made a correction by painting over it several times using the side of that same brush until the line was gone and the crisis was averted.

Note: a round brush and a round brush with a point each have their own purpose.

### Understand what Each of your Brushes Can Do

It is a good idea to play around with each of your brushes and find out what different marks you can make with them. Try holding them at different angles and make marks with different amounts of pressure.

If you have very little water on your brush the marks you make will look like blades of grass. This is actually a technique called dry brushing. If you are painting a face (or a sky) and this happens, you will immediately know that you need to add more paint or water to your brush before you continue.

### White of the Paper to Make Grey Hair

I painted around where I imagined the white hair to be, which means that I saved the white of the paper to make his white hair. In watercolor, this technique is called negative painting.

### Eye Highlights of Guache

I painted over the spot where I wanted a highlight in his eye so I used some white gouache to correct it. I added a little water so the paint was not too thick. You can also use titanium white watercolor paint (which is opaque) straight from the tube with a little water.

Guache is a water based paint that is opaque.

### Lighten your Colors by Adding Water

To lighten a color, just add water to the mix. If you try to add Chinese white to lighten it, you will create a chalky looking color.

### Values

I find that I almost always have to add more glazes because I misjudged how dark to paint my colors. Watercolor dries lighter and it can be difficult to judge color values.

The more watery your mixture, the lighter it will become when it has fully dried.

Note: Correct values, or the lightness and darkness of the shapes you paint, will make a big difference to the success of your painting.

### Homemade Viewfinder

An artist's viewfinder is a great device to help you assess the correct values in a face. A viewfinder simply isolates a small part of your subject so you can better judge the value of any one part. This works whether you're working from real life or a reference photo.

You can make viewfinders quite easily from a piece of old watercolor paper with a 1  $\frac{1}{2}$ " hole cut into it.

### Paint Warm/Cool Colors Together for Depth

When you paint a warm color next to a cooler color it will help add depth by making the warm color appear closer.

### Artistic License

As an artist you have the ability to add and subtract anything that doesn't fit with your artistic vision. I chose not to follow the reference photo, which had Yurek wearing dark tinted glasses on a sunny fall day.

My artistic license included not painting the tint on his glasses. Seeing his eyes clearly helped me to connect to my memories of him and the beautiful day we met.

I hope that you have found some insight into the wonderful medium that is watercolor and I want to take a moment to thank everyone at Franklin, both past and present, for helping to make it such a special place. Without their inspiration and friendship, I wouldn't be the artist and Teacher I am today. If you have found something helpful in this tutorial, please consider making a donation today.

**Happy Painting !**

With gratitude  
Nancy Buckingham

To make a donation to Franklin Carmichael and help them through this difficult time, please go to their website. [www.fcag.ca](http://www.fcag.ca)

Watercolor Skin Tones  
(Daniel Smith)

2022

Darcy Buckingham

Quin Rose + Hansa Yellow Deep  
(Perm Rose) (Winsor Yellow)



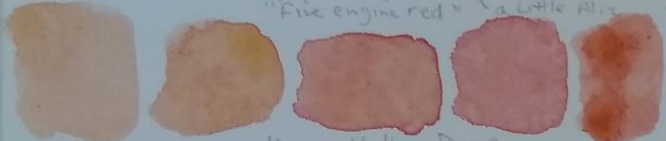
Quin Rose + Yellow Ochre (Raw Sienna + G.S.)



Quin Rose + Lemon Yellow



Yellow Ochre + Pyrrol Scarlet (mix Winsor Red + a little Aliz.)



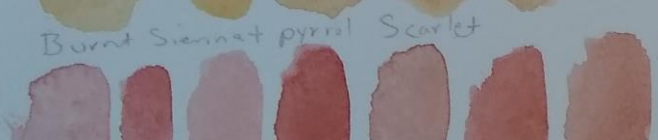
Burnt Sienna + Hansa Yellow Deep



Burnt Sienna + Raw Sienna



Burnt Sienna + Pyrrol Scarlet



Burnt Umber + Pyrrol Scarlet



Quin Rose + Raw Sienna



Burnt Umber + Yellow Ochre



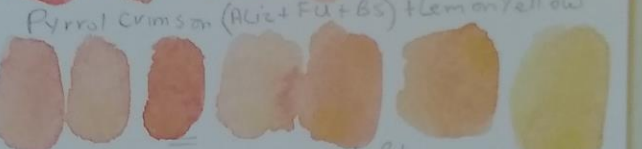
Quin Rose + Raw Sienna



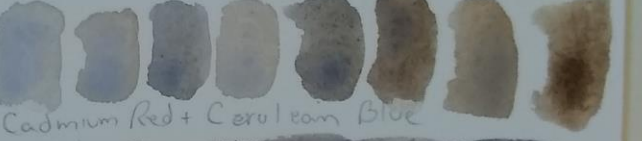
Quin Rose + Quinburnt Orange (trans Orange + Burnt Sienna)



Pyrrol Crimson (Aliz + Fu + Bs) + Lemon Yellow



Burnt Umber + Ultramarine Blue



Cadmium Red + Cerulean Blue



Burnt S. + Ultra. Blue + Alizerin



Burnt S. + Yellow Ochre (Raw Sienna)



Alizerin + Yellow Ochre + Cerulean (Raw S.)

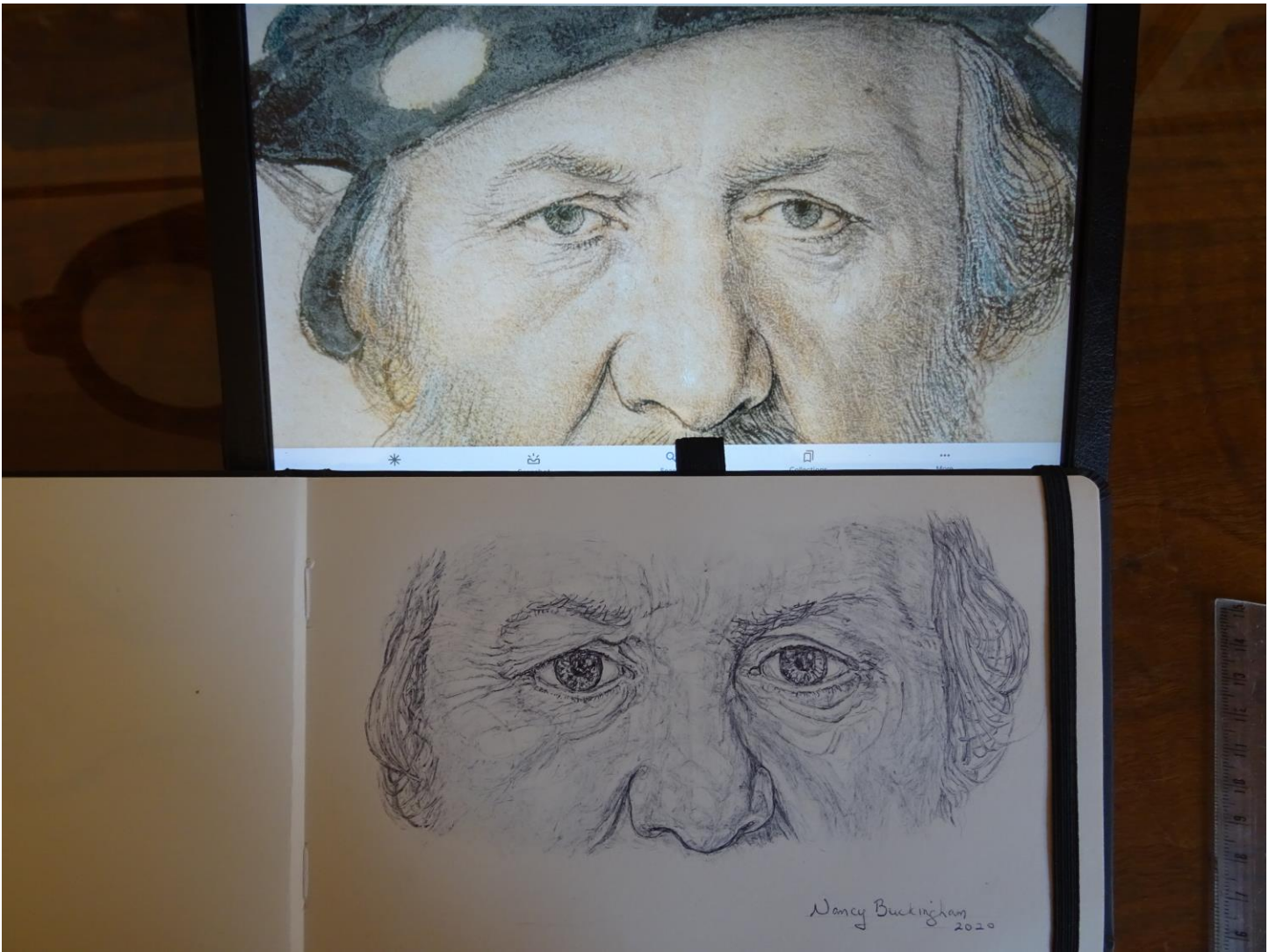


Alizerin + Yellow Ochre (Raw S.)



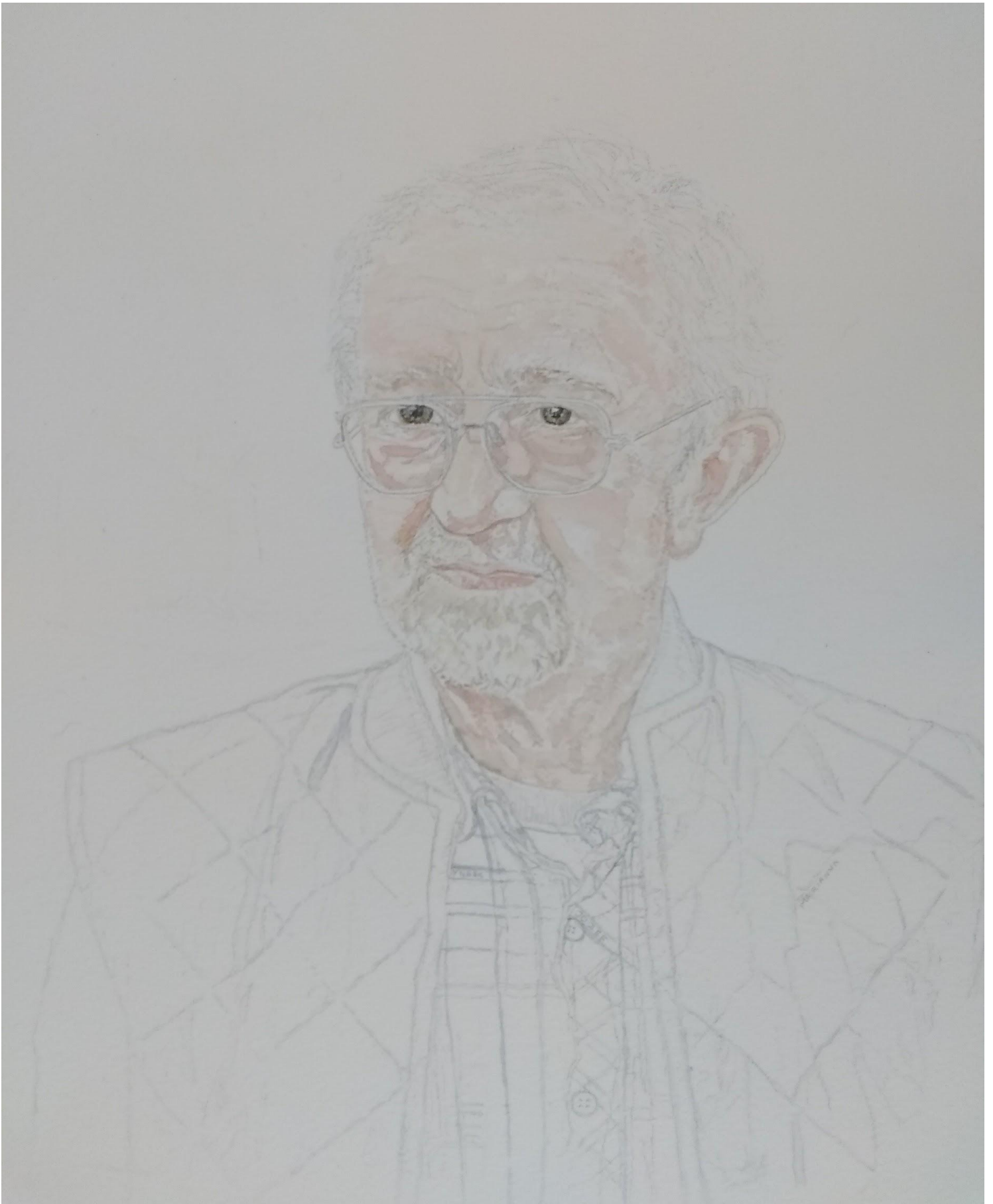
MIXING SKIN COLORS - ART TUTOR

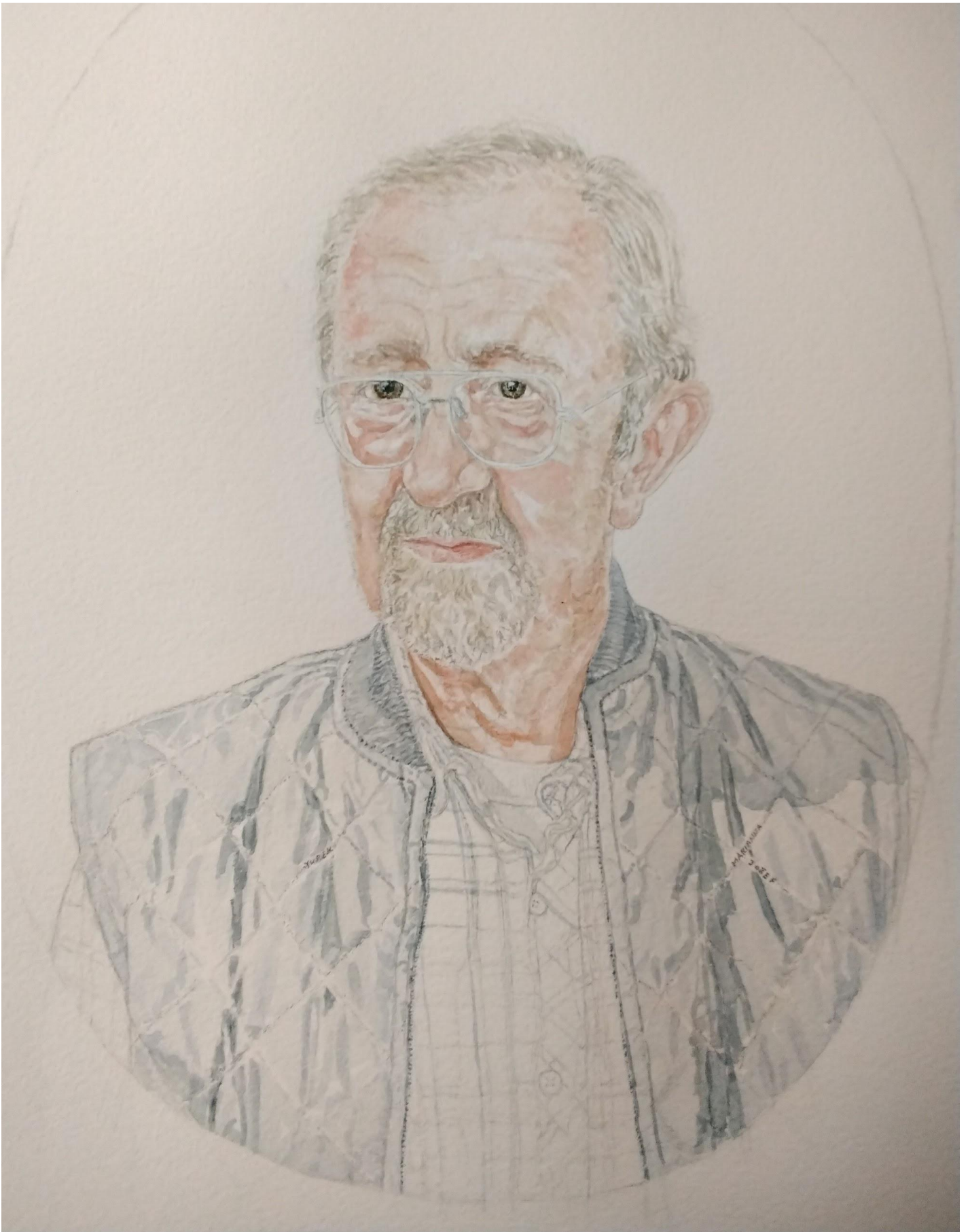
Kitchen Sink - Skin Tone Options

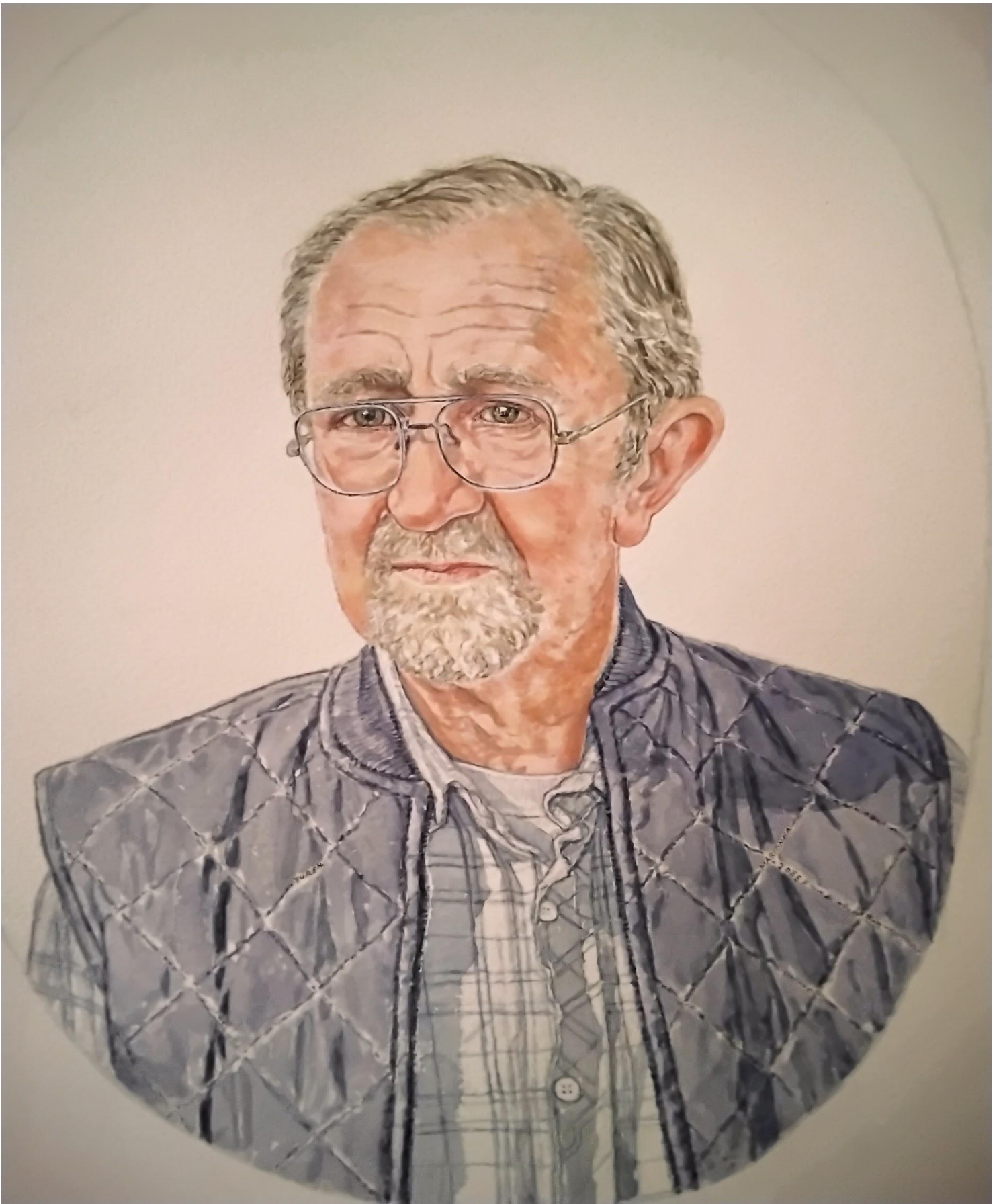


Nancy's Pen and Ink Study  
made from Hans Holbein's "Charles de Solier" in 1534









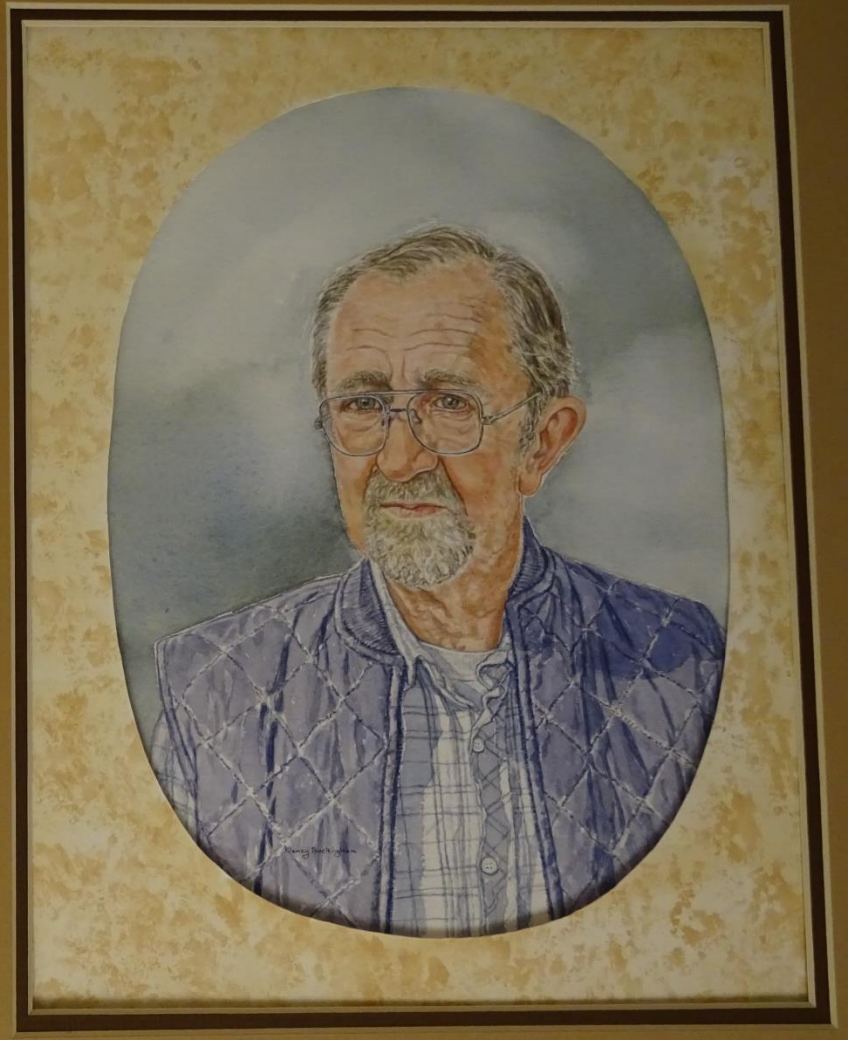
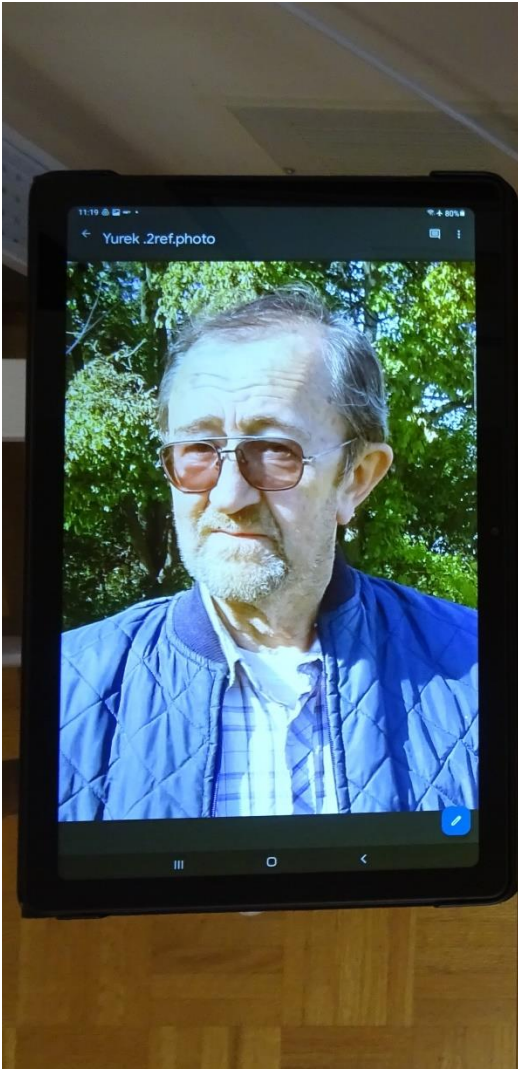


Photo reference and framed final painting



Nancy Buckingham



Yurek's Finished Painting Framed