

An Approach to Painting a Portrait

Rembrandt is arguably one of the best (if not the best) portrait painter to have ever lived. His techniques have influenced the way artists approach and portray faces even to this day.

Here is a rough breakdown of some of his concepts to keep in mind when tackling this difficult subject. The references are focused on an average Caucasian under an average cool light, but can be adjusted and applied to the complexion of any race. There are many variables to take into consideration when capturing the likeness of your model including type and temperature of lighting, the individual's complexion, surrounding ambient objects that may create a color cast, etc.



Value Structure

The human face has VERY subtle value changes - even when comparing the lit side of the face to the shadow side. The tendency is to paint the contrast between the shadow and the light sides too far apart on the value scale. The values are actually quite close - there is more of a temperature difference. It is helpful to try and envision the face in a “posterized” fashion - one mass of lights and one mass of shadows. Many artists pre-mix separate piles of paints for each realm.



Color/Hue

The human face can be broken down into three general hue zones. Inevitably each zone will have accents of hues from the other two zones, but will usually lean toward these colors.



Top 1/3

Yellow, green, and/or bluish

The forehead area often receives the most amount of light. Since the skin is thin and relatively tight to the bone - there are less blood vessels - resulting in less rosy hues.

Mid 1/3

Rosy and/or Orange

This area tends to be more “fleshy” as many there are more muscles and fat. Thus, there are more blood vessels - resulting in more rosy hues.

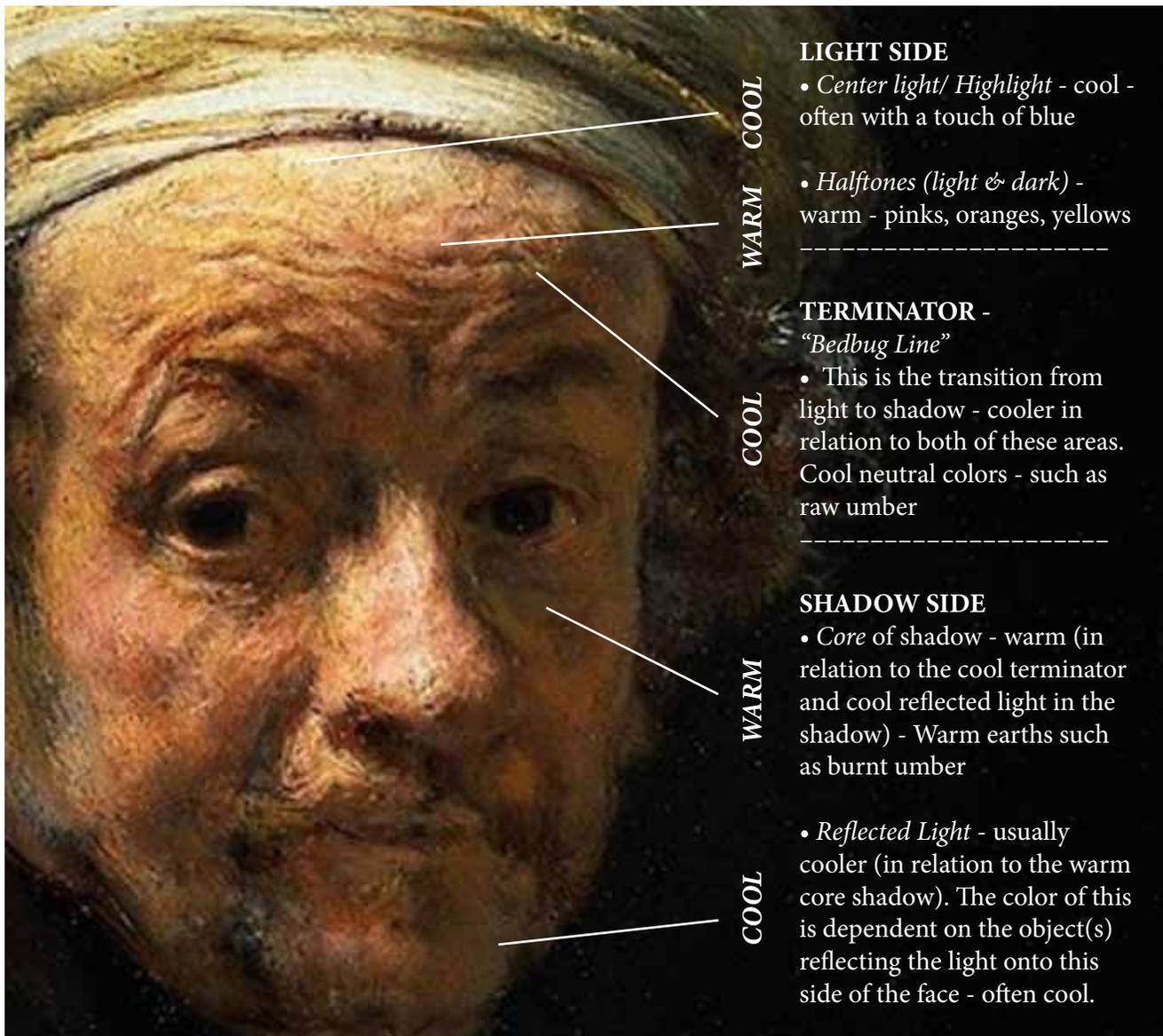
Lower 1/3

Green, and/or bluish

This area is often in shadow and is affected by reflected light. In a male the area is often affected by the roots of shaven facial hair - resulting in a greenish or bluish cast. In a female it often appears as a more neutral set of hues.

Color Temperature

Since we as artists are dealing with the very limited value range of paint (when compared to real life), we often can “turn” form using temperature changes. Here is the general temperature structure that Rembrandt used with a cool light source (north light) - resulting in warm shadows. It must be stressed that the guide below states temperatures in RELATION to what the color is placed against. Color temperature is a “relative” phenomenon. For instance - a violet next to a red will appear cool (due to the presence of blue in the hue) and violet will appear warm when placed next to blue (due to the presence of red in the hue). It also should be noted that each color has a cool and warm version of it. For instance - there are cool reds (reds which lean toward blue) and warm reds (reds that lean toward yellow) - it is often a very subtle but important shift. So, if the area is designated as a “cool”, this does not mean it should be a blatant blue color.



Other helpful tips:

- As a plane recedes (turns away from the viewer) the colors will become less chromatic (intense).
- Colors will appear at their most chromatic (intense) in the halftone area on the plane facing the viewer.