

The Portrait. Between Interior and Exterior, between Two - and Threedimensional figures

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ABSTRACT : This article aims to explore and research a wide range of styles, techniques, color schemes, and working methodologies that focus on the field of portraiture, which can be divided into three main visual directions: a modular polyptych, a series of rectangular canvases, and an installation — all brought together under the conceptual umbrella of the portrait genre visual field. The artworks belong to second-year Bachelor's degree students from the Painting specializations of the Faculties of Fine Arts in Timișoara and Iași, and will be exhibited in April in Timișoara in the context of an institutional collaboration between the two research centers: CCAVC (Center of Creation of Contemporary Visual Arts) and PVC (Contemporary Visual Practices).

KEYWORDS : university, collaboration, exhibition, portrait, mixed media, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, painting, photography, drawing, collage.

Introduction

A central part of the academic educational process dedicated to painting is experimentation, which is an essential methodological tool for developing visual thinking, critical spirit and artistic innovation. When it comes to higher education, experimentation isn't just about running basic technical trials. It's a methodical way of approaching the creative process, where analysis, reflection, and interpretation are all key parts of the artistic journey.

Through sustained experimentation, the study of painting may be understood as a form of applied research, wherein practice functions not merely as technical training

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but as a structured mode of inquiry. In this context, the studio is like a laboratory: materials are tested, visual procedures are refined, and chromatic relationships are systematically examined. These processes go beyond questions of technique to engage with broader investigations into aesthetic theory, perceptual dynamics and the construction of visual meaning. A painter's engagement with pigment, surface and composition constitutes a research methodology in which practical manipulation and conceptual reflection operate in a reciprocal relationship.

Within this framework, learning transcends the mere accumulation of skills, taking on the character of an epistemological journey. The expressive potential of form, colour and spatial organisation is revealed by each experiment, whether it is successful or not. The iterative cycle of hypothesis, execution, evaluation and revision mirrors the logic of scholarly research and reinforces the idea that artistic practice is both cognitive and exploratory. As students progress through this process, they not only develop technical proficiency but also critical awareness, learning to contextualize their work within historical traditions and current discourses.

Crucially, this pedagogical model encourages students to question and challenge the conventions of academic painting where appropriate. Rather than rigidly adhering to inherited norms, students are encouraged to explore the boundaries of established compositional systems, stylistic conventions, and representational techniques. This boundary-pushing does not imply rejecting tradition, but presupposes a thorough understanding of it from which meaningful innovation can emerge. In this way, experimentation becomes a methodological tool and a catalyst for originality.

The outcome of this process is the development of an individual artistic language that synthesises disciplined analysis with imaginative freedom. Careful thinking ensures coherence, intentionality and conceptual depth, while creative autonomy allows for expressive risk-taking and personal resonance. The resulting style is neither arbitrary nor purely intuitive: it is the product of reflective practice, critical engagement and sustained enquiry. Thus, when conceived as applied research, the study of painting fosters a mode of artistic development in which knowledge production and creative expression are inseparably intertwined.

Experimentation further facilitates the construction of a sustained and critical dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity, positioning painting as a discursive field in which inherited conventions are neither passively preserved nor uncritically abandoned, but rigorously reexamined. Through experimental methodologies, academic values—such as compositional order, technical discipline, and fidelity to established aesthetic principles—are reinterpreted in light of emergent visual paradigms shaped by technological innovation, globalized cultural exchange, and shifting theoretical frameworks. This process enables the recontextualization of tradition within contemporary epistemologies, ensuring its continued relevance while simultaneously

opening it to transformation.

Such a dialogical dynamic is inherently interdisciplinary. The contemporary study of painting increasingly intersects with fields such as visual studies, media theory, philosophy, and cultural analysis, thereby expanding the conceptual boundaries of what painting can signify and accomplish. Experimentation operates at these intersections, generating hybrid forms and new modes of visual inquiry that challenge medium-specific limitations. In doing so, it not only broadens the technical and conceptual repertoire of the student but also situates painting within a broader network of artistic and intellectual practices.

Within this expanded framework, academic education in painting may be understood as a complex research environment rather than a static system of instruction. The studio becomes a laboratory of artistic formation, where hypotheses concerning form, materiality, temporality, and representation are continuously tested and reformulated. Pedagogy is thus reoriented toward critical reflection, analytical rigor, and sustained inquiry. Students are encouraged to engage with both the historical canon and contemporary discourses, negotiating their position within a continuum that links past achievements to present challenges.

In this context, experimentation functions as a catalytic force that activates processes of learning, reflexivity and self-definition. It stimulates interrogation of visual assumptions, fosters methodological innovation and supports progressive clarification of artistic intention. Through iterative exploration and critical evaluation, students refine their technical capacities and conceptual frameworks. The visual identity of the contemporary artist is shaped by a constant interplay of continuity and change, discipline and invention, theoretical awareness and creative autonomy. This results in a dynamic and evolving visual identity that is always changing.

Methods and methodology

This educational project is designed for second- and third-year undergraduate students on the Bachelor's degree programme. It is structured around three interrelated foundational principles. When implemented systematically within a coherent pedagogical framework, these principles have the potential to generate significant formative and artistic outcomes.

Firstly, the programme emphasises cultivating advanced observational competencies and developing visual thinking. Students are guided to refine their ability to perceive, analyse and interpret visual phenomena with precision and critical awareness. Observation is approached as an active, interpretative process that integrates perceptual acuity with conceptual reflection, rather than as passive recording. Through sustained study of form, space, light and colour, learners develop the ability to construct visual meaning, thereby strengthening their analytical and creative faculties.

Secondly, the curriculum prioritises acquiring and progressively refining technical and technological competencies by engaging with diverse media and materials. By working with different supports, tools and material conditions, students expand their technical repertoire while developing adaptability and problem-solving skills. Integrating experimentation into studio practice ensures that technical mastery evolves in dialogue with conceptual enquiry rather than functioning as an isolated skill set.

Thirdly, the project aims to foster a well-founded sense of artistic, aesthetic and ethical values. As well as developing technical proficiency and perceptual skills, students are encouraged to critically reflect on the cultural, social and moral dimensions of artistic production. This aspect of the programme highlights the artist's responsibility as a creator and cultural agent, fostering discernment, integrity, and sensitivity to the broader implications of visual expression. The educational model thus supports the development of artists who are technically competent, conceptually articulate, ethically aware, and aesthetically reflective.

Together, these three principles form a comprehensive educational structure integrating perceptual development, technical expertise, and value formation within a unified framework.

Alongside verbal competencies in interpersonal communication, contemporary educational theory increasingly recognises the importance of visual literacy as a fundamental cognitive and communicative ability. Visual literacy encompasses the ability to interpret and decode information presented in visual form, as well as the ability to generate, organise and communicate ideas through images and spatial configurations (Debes, 1969; Duncum, 2004). This 'visual alphabet' allows individuals to structure their thought processes visually, engage in imaginative projection and construct meaning through form, colour and spatial relationships. In this sense, visual cognition operates as a complementary system to linguistic reasoning, contributing to complex modes of understanding and expression (Arnheim, 1969).

Human experience is profoundly mediated by visual perception. Cognitive research suggests that individuals continuously reconstruct external reality internally through mental imagery and perceptual schemata (Arnheim, 1969; Gombrich, 1960). The surrounding world is not passively received, but actively organised in the mind as a sequence of images, shaped by prior knowledge, memory and cultural frameworks. Of the sensory modalities, sight is generally considered one of the most immediate and efficient mechanisms for orienting oneself within spatial environments. Through the perception of light and its modulation — manifested as variations in brightness, shadow, colour and contrast — individuals identify forms, differentiate surfaces and comprehend spatial depth. Consequently, the visual field becomes the primary matrix through which shapes, chromatic relations, and spatial hierarchies are perceived and understood.

The structural components of visual language, such as line, shape, colour, texture,

space and composition, constitute a system analogous to linguistic grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). These elements function as distinct yet interconnected units with identifiable formal and expressive properties. When organised according to coherent compositional principles, they generate images capable of conveying meaning, emotion and conceptual content. Thus, the means of visual expression constitute a structured 'alphabet' that is governed by established principles of organisation, balance, rhythm, contrast and harmony. Each element has its own semiotic identity, while also contributing to the broader system of representation.

When it comes to education, developing visual literacy means learning to navigate and manipulate the visual alphabet deliberately and with critical awareness. Students learn to decode existing visual messages and construct representations that articulate complex ideas and values. Visual communication is therefore not subordinate to verbal discourse, but constitutes an autonomous and equally sophisticated mode of knowledge production and cultural expression.

The term "technique" is understood to denote an organised system of deliberately conceived procedures through which artistic intention is materialised in a concrete form. Rather than functioning merely as manual skill or mechanical execution, technique constitutes a structured methodology that mediates between concept and realization. The selection of materials, the manipulation of tools, and the orchestration of processes collectively shape the formal and expressive qualities of the artwork. In this sense, technique operates as both an operational framework and a cognitive strategy, guiding the transformation of abstract ideas into perceptible visual configurations.

It is an irrefutable fact of which there is ample evidence to support the contention that the pursuit of technical innovation has played a decisive role in the evolution of artistic practice. The ongoing pursuit of novel procedures, materials, and modes of expression has not only expanded the formal vocabulary of art but has also redefined its conceptual horizons. The advent of oil painting in the Renaissance, the evolution of printmaking techniques, and the exploration of industrial materials in modern and contemporary art serve to illustrate how technological advancements give rise to novel aesthetic prospects and reconfigure artistic frameworks. Consequently, innovation in technique is not merely an ancillary aspect of artistic production; rather, it functions as a dynamic force that catalyses stylistic transformation and theoretical reorientation.

This standpoint is in alignment with the assertion put forward by Nathan Knobler, which posits that artistic evolution is inextricably linked to experimentation within the studio environment. In *Visual Dialogue*, Knobler (1992) emphasises that the exploration of technique fosters a dialogical process between artist, material, and idea, enabling innovation to emerge from sustained practical inquiry. Consequently, studio research becomes a site where technical investigation and conceptual reflection converge, reinforcing the understanding of technique as a catalyst for both creative discovery and

the historical progression of art.

The art of all times has gravitated towards the representation of the human body. Focusing attention on the human figure has been one of the most frequently used sources of inspiration, and portraiture and expression, in particular, are also our choice for the representations explored in this project.

The studio research made together with our students has led us to spectacular experiments. These works are part of a large, modular project that began several years ago. Within this project, an installation-type exhibition belonging to 2nd and 3rd year students entitled *Faces–Faces* was organized and opened at the *Pod Pogor* Gallery in Iași in 2012. In 2020, we also organized the online exhibition *Portrait in a Square*, which included a selection of students' artworks created within the course *Materials, Processes and Procedures for Painting*. In 2022, as part of an Erasmus+ mobility, the group exhibition *Around the Square* was organized at *James Madison University* in Harrisonburg, Virginia, with the participation of students and professors from several specializations, like: Graphics, Painting, Pedagogy of Visual and Decorative Arts, Textile Arts, and Mural Art.

exhibitions are part of the projects belonging to *The Center for Research in Painting – Contemporary Visual Practices* of Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, *George Enescu* National University of Arts in Iași. The center aims to promote freedom of expression, creativity, and imagination for each student in solving portrait compositions.

This project is just a pretext for experiment with various techniques, in order to develop artistic creative skills and this approach involves the use of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional supports, beginning with drawing techniques and continuing with the diversity and complexity of chromatic techniques, up to the experimentation of mixed and unconventional techniques (hologram – portrait in a cube). The experiments carried out start from the anatomical aspect of the portrait and continue with its multiple interpretations, focusing especially on the idea of expression, as well as on the playful aspect of this artistic genre, which encourages creative freedom and implicitly fosters the development of imagination. Real form dissolves and nuances spaces in a context where value and chromatic contrasts play a symbolic role in portrait compositions.

Guideline and directions

Concurrently, the pedagogical process engages the psychological dimension of artistic inquiry through the systematic exploration of human emotion as expressed in facial representation. The study and illustration of a wide spectrum of facial expressions—ranging from subtle affective nuances to intense emotional states—constitutes a central component of this investigation. These explorations are mediated through diverse technical approaches and material practices, including oil, acrylic, collage, wax, and mixed-media procedures. Each of these contributes distinct tactile, chromatic, and

expressive qualities. The depiction's communicative potential is further amplified by variations in colour range, texture, and surface treatment, allowing students to examine how formal decisions influence emotional resonance and interpretative depth.

Historically, the depiction of the human face has occupied a privileged position within the domain of artistic representation, extending from antiquity to the present day. The human face has long been regarded as a locus of interiority and a privileged site for the manifestation of character, emotion, and spiritual presence. Within both artistic and philosophical traditions, it has been conceptualised as a portal to self-knowledge and truth, with the capacity to unveil the psychological and moral dimensions of human existence. The sustained artistic interest in physiognomy and expressive gesture reflects a broader epistemological assumption that the visible surface of the face can serve as an index of invisible inner states.

This conception is articulated with particular clarity by Camelian Demetrescu (1966), who emphasises the existential dimension of artistic creation. Demetrescu (n.d.) contends that the process of drawing or painting, however technically proficient it may appear, invariably involves the artist engaging in a deep and intimate introspective dialogue. Each mark made on the surface of the canvas becomes part of a broader meditation on doubt, freedom, and the search for spiritual certainty. As he observes, uncertainty, while it may destabilise, preserves freedom of thought by resisting the ossification of prejudice; concomitantly, the aspiration toward spiritual certainty constitutes the very telos of artistic endeavour. The sublime, as understood in aesthetic theory, emerges from a dialectic tension between doubt and unease (Demetrescu, 1966).

Within this interpretative framework, the study of facial expression transcends anatomical accuracy and technical virtuosity. The work thus becomes an exercise in existential reflection, wherein the representation of the face serves as a medium for interrogating identity, interiority, and the conditions of artistic truth. It is posited that, through the interplay of material experimentation and psychological inquiry, students are invited to approach portraiture not merely as depiction, but as a process of self-examination and aesthetic discovery.

Dot

In visual communication, the point exceeds the abstract framework and takes shape. The point is a geometric element that has no dimensions. Among all the elements and principles recognized in visual communication, the point is considered the simplest element of visual language. It is a reference which the other elements of visual language are built from; therefore, it's fundamental. When the point is drawn on a white sheet of paper, it becomes matter and establishes a relationship with the surrounding space (the relationship between fullness and emptiness). Thus, it can be analyzed through identification, definition and positioning within the visual field. The relationship between

points can extend both on a value and a chromatic level, leading to an image made of juxtaposed dots of different types, as shown in figures no. 1 and 2 and 3.

Dots that are not spontaneous may be described in academic terminology as deliberate, premeditated, or systematically constructed marks. In contradistinction to gestural or impulsive points that emerge from instinctive movement, such dots are intentionally placed according to compositional logic, structural rhythm, or conceptual intent.

In the context of visual analysis, they can be characterised as follows:

1. Intentional marks emphasise conscious placement.
2. The presence of controlled graphic units serves to emphasise the technical discipline employed.
3. The presence of structurally organised points is indicative of an integration within a compositional system.
4. The presence of premeditated visual elements is indicative of prior conceptual planning.
5. Programmatic or systematic dot applications are indicative of repetition that is governed by a rule or method.

From a theoretical perspective, non-spontaneous dots function less as expressive traces of gesture and more as modular elements within a visual syntax. The arrangement of these elements often reflects order, calculation, and compositional strategy, contributing to rhythm, texture, density, and spatial articulation. In this sense, they function not as incidental by-products of movement but as deliberate elements of a structured visual language.



Fig. 1 Alin Rudei, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of controlled dot.



Fig. 2 Alin Rudei, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of gestural dot.



Fig.3. Andreea Iakab, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara. Example of dots as intentional marks.

Line

Line is considered a fundamental component of visual language, serving as a primary means through which form, movement, and spatial organisation are articulated. Conceptually, a line may be understood as originating from a single point and extending toward another, thereby establishing direction, continuity, and relational structure within the pictorial field. The line's capacity to organise visual perception and generate compositional coherence is attributable to its variations in thickness, rhythm, curvature, and intensity.

In theoretical discourse, the line has been defined not merely as a static contour,

but as the dynamic manifestation of movement. As Paul Klee (1961) famously described, the line is "a point taken for a walk," thereby underscoring its kinetic and generative character. From this perspective, the line can be said to embody the transformation of the point into a trajectory, thus functioning as a foundational element in drawing and visual construction. The function of the image is to mediate between abstraction and representation, to structure figures, to delineate forms, and to guide the viewer's perceptual engagement with the image (see Figures 4, 5, and 6).



Fig. 4 Larisa Ilucă, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of rectangular line.



Fig. 5 Larisa Ilucă, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of curved line.



Fig.6. Andreea Iakab, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara. Example of horizontal line on shape.

Form and colour patch

In his theoretical examination, Gheorghe Achiței (1988) defines form as "a set of elements capable of visually delimiting and signaling any presence in space", thereby emphasizing its role in organizing and articulating visual perception. Form can be understood synonymously with terms such as figure or, in reference to the human body, silhouette, as it conveys both the outward appearance and the tangible presence of an object or entity within space. Conceptually, form emerges through the enclosure of a line, with a closed contour delineating boundaries and transforming abstract linear trajectories into visually and spatially recognizable structures. In this sense, the creation of form represents the materialisation of spatial presence through the disciplined interplay of line, contour, and perceptual definition.



Fig. 7 Ștefania Ciobanu, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of rigorous color patch.



Fig. 8 Ștefania Ciobanu, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași. Example of overlapped translucent color patches.



Fig.9. Andreea Iakab, 2nd year, bachelor degree, Painting Specialization, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara. Example of collage with different materials: paper, leather to create texture in a thermodynamic contrast.

Conclusions

The experimental approach fosters a critical dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity, enabling the reexamination and reinterpretation of established academic principles in light of emergent visual paradigms and interdisciplinary

intersections. Within this framework, academic painting education transcends conventional instruction, functioning as both a rigorous research environment and a laboratory for artistic formation. Here, experimentation operates as a driving force that catalyzes learning, stimulates reflective practice, and supports the ongoing construction and refinement of the contemporary artist's visual identity. This model positions artistic inquiry as an integrative process in which technical mastery, conceptual exploration, and critical engagement converge to produce innovative and contextually informed creative outcomes.

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