



Ellen Buselli

Paint to Finish

Ellen Buselli keeps her paintings fresh through careful observation and precise brushstrokes

My approach to painting is very direct. I am painting what I see with emphasis on the light and shadow. I mix my oil colors directly on my palette as I go. I “paint to finish”—meaning I am very decisive and economical with my brushstrokes making each one effective after careful observation. This approach helps to avoid reworking or overworking and keeps the painting fresh. Carefully observed values and colors make the painting read correctly.

I only paint from life and do not use photographs because what I actually see is so much more fascinating and interesting to me than a photograph. Painting from life allows me to make constant decisions as I compare the last brushstroke to the next one and evaluate if it is darker/lighter or warmer/cooler. In addition, the application of each brushstroke is important and decisions need to be made on the opacity or transparency of the quality of the paint, the direction of the brushstrokes and type of edges needed in each passage of the painting. An edge can be hard or soft or “lost and found.” These elements—values, color, edges, quality of paint and brushstrokes—are the keys to making a two-dimensional surface appear three-dimensional. It is a bit like magic.

Working this way keeps the act of painting and the creative state active and engaging, helps to keep the work fresh, and hopefully prevents one from overworking a painting. I never



Salon, oil on linen, 20 x 22" (51 x 56 cm)

Blue-and-white porcelain vases collected from my trips to China are always a favorite to paint. Here the composition is not head on, but looking from above. The wooden table, cloth and flowers suggest an indoor set up in a salon or drawing room often seen in the last turn-of-the-century homes. The dramatic light hides and reveals.

get tired or bored painting this way for every new painting is a fresh new challenge offering many unique things to translate to a painted surface. I have learned to see and observe in a more abstract way when working with these key painting elements by breaking

each part of the painting into abstract concepts rather than thinking of the object itself. It doesn't matter if it is a still life, floral, portrait, figure or landscape—I use the same way of thinking and observing to understand each situation. People who have

watched me paint in my studio have told me that I spend most of my time looking and observing, then I will paint an area quickly and with decisiveness. In my studio, I only paint in north light. The light is cool and soft, and because it is indirect, the shadows and light stay consistent throughout the day.

When painting flowers, direct painting is the best way to capture the blooms before they wilt. It forces me to quickly and correctly make every brushstroke, value, color and edge count as a finished one. The flowers need to be painted first with indications of the values in the rest of the painting. After the flowers have wilted, I continue to work on the other areas until the painting is finished, and unless a correction is really needed, I try not to rework the flowers in order to maintain their fresh look.

When painting landscapes on location, I do tend to work more quickly because of time constraints. The scene is constantly changing, and I edit quickly what is important to capture before the scene changes to another painting. In landscape painting, it is important to not get caught up in the details at all until the very end. Mass and form, darkest darks, middle tones and lightest lights need to be established first. Most importantly, the quantity and distribution of each value makes for compelling compositions.

The other most important elements to painting, for me, are the composition and drawing. I always spend the most time on the initial block-in and composition before anything else. Once this part of the process has been established to my liking, the rest of the painting will flow so much more easily. It is pointless to continue to the actual painting stage if this part of the process is not exactly the way I envision. It is the skeleton of the painting—all that follows depends on this initial structure.

Living in New York City has



Red & Pink Roses, oil on linen, 15 x 16" (38 x 41 cm)


Every floral bouquet offers unique color stories. Here the David Austen roses in red, coral pink and white are offset by the tinted jade of the glass vase. The blooms need to be painted first before the flowers wilt, then more time can be spent on the vase and stems. Some final glazing was used on the glass vase to enhance the semitransparent tinted green glass.

also been a great inspiration to me. Inspired by the last-turn-of-the-century painters and further back, I visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art frequently to study firsthand painters that have influenced my work over the years such as Chardin, Fantin-Latour, Chase, Sargent, Emil Carlsen and others.

My approach is quite traditional in the sense that my palette is set up with warm and cool versions of each color, plus white and black. I can create any color needed from my standard palette, only occasionally adding a special color if really needed such as for unique floral color. My favorite brush is the versatile filbert—I find that I can make pretty much any brushstroke I need with this great brush. I have handy some flats, sables and some rounds for some

techniques, but in the end, I always go back to the filbert.

I used to paint on stretched canvas, but now prefer to paint on double oil primed canvas boards using Claessens Linen 13. Previously, I would make all of my boards, but over the years, I have been happy with most of the various art suppliers that sell them such as New Traditions, Raymar and Sourcetek.

I find that although my approach and technique is consistent, and I have not changed my palette or materials much over the years, each painting is new experience. There is always a bit of trepidation when starting a new piece, but because of all the variables in nature, the effect of light on different surfaces, and the beauty of all things, everything always seems new and exciting. 

My Art in the Making #1 David Austen Roses

The painting *David Austen Roses* was inspired by the incredible flowers on offer at the NYC 28th Street flower market. The yellow, white and fuchsia pink blooms were exciting to the eye. The set up did not take long because the flowers in any arrangement were compelling. One main

glorious bloom in golden yellow was so beautiful I placed it front and center. Some say that the composition should always be off center and to never place anything in the middle, but I find this type of composition to be engaging and balanced and the main concept when the subject matter demands it.



STAGE 1 ESTABLISHING COLORS

In the initial session, the composition is established with a painted drawing using a mixture of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. This serves as the skeleton of the painting to follow. For flower paintings, the initial drawing also includes the dark greens of the stems and leaves to give a sturdy base to the composition. These elements are usually the darkest darks in the painting. From there, indication markers of color and value of each flower are noted in the darkest dark areas. After the drawing sketch, the background and table are roughly painted in the correct color and value. The lightly toned canvas serves as the lightest light for the time being. Now a value range is established from the lightest lights to the darkest darks.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Oil Colors

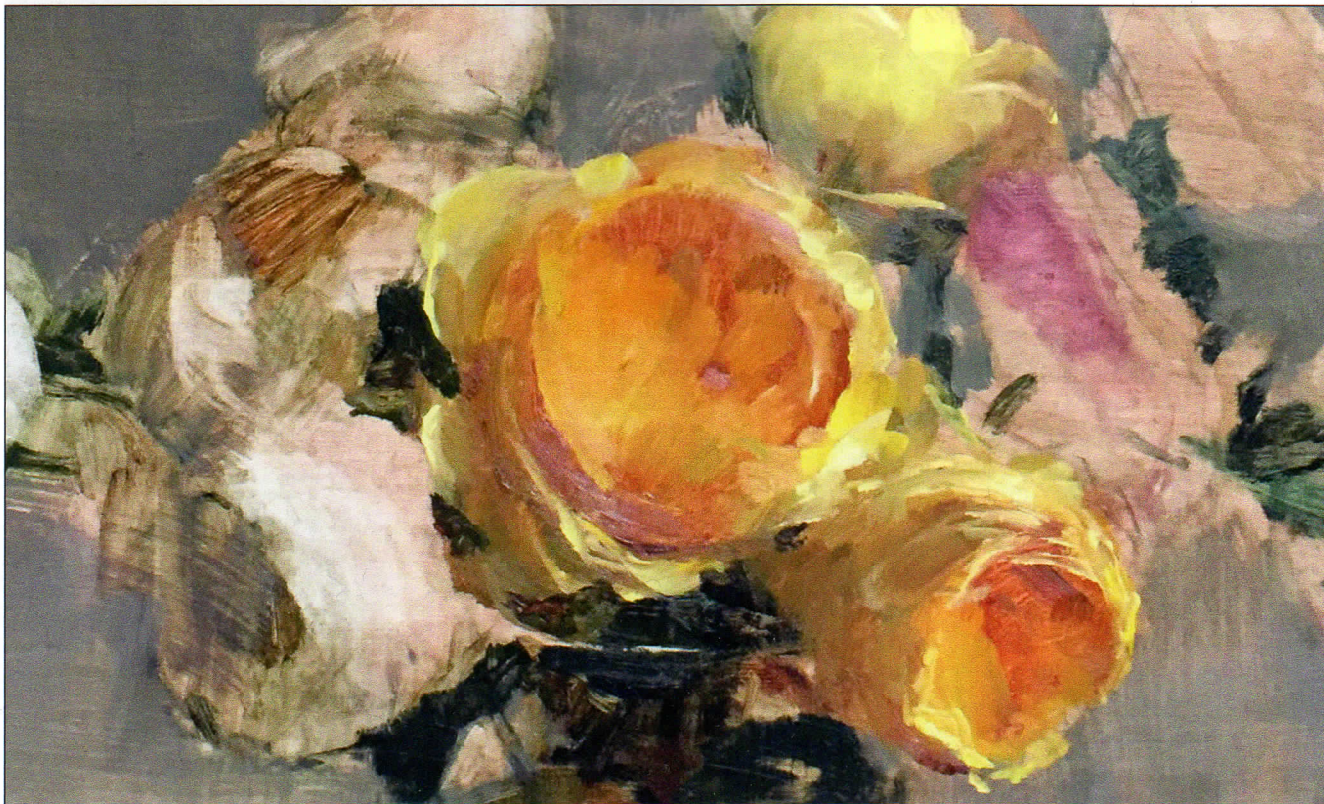
- » Naples Yellow
- » Cadmium Yellow Light
- » Yellow Ochre
- » Raw Sienna
- » Cadmium Orange
- » Cadmium Red Light
- » Vermillion

- » Burnt Sienna
- » Transparent Oxide Red
- » Burnt Umber
- » Raw Umber
- » Cerulean Blue
- » Cobalt Blue
- » Ultramarine Blue
- » Alizarin

- » Cobalt Violet
- » Dioxazine Purple
- » Viridian Deep
- » Sap Green
- » Ivory Black
- » Titanium White

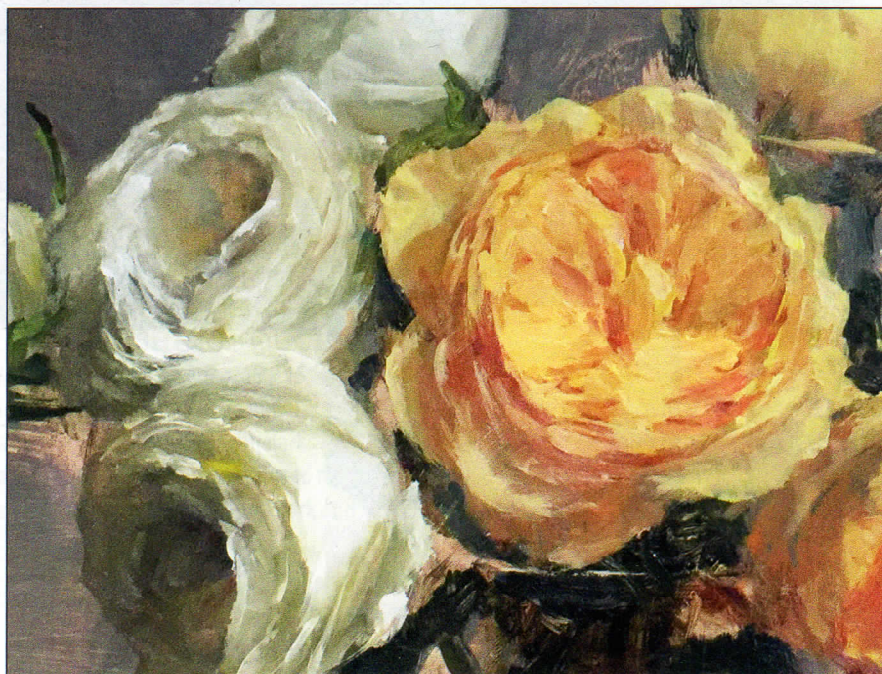
Other Tools

- » Gamsol
- » Filbert Brushes, various sizes from 2-8
- » Oil primed canvas on board – Claessens Linen 13



STAGE 2 PROGRESSION OF BRUSHSTROKES

This stage shows the progression of building the flowers brushstroke by brushstroke always considering the values, colors, edges, quality of the paint and brushstrokes. From here, I usually work in one color family at a time when painting the flowers. Since the value range has been established earlier it helps to guide me in making proper decisions to establish the values and color ranges in each bloom as I go along.



STAGE 3 PAINTING TO FINISH

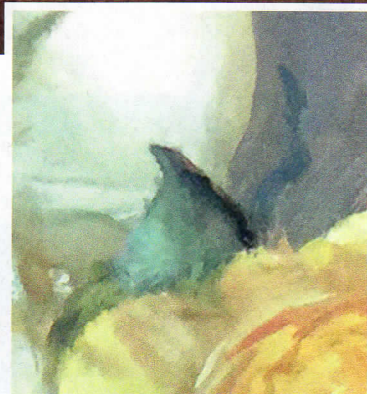
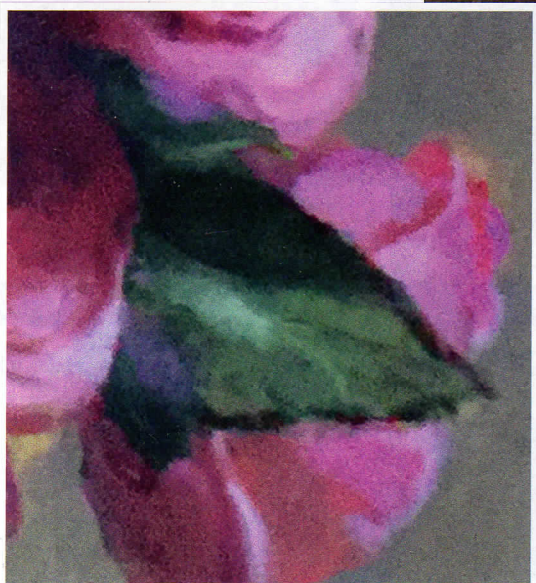
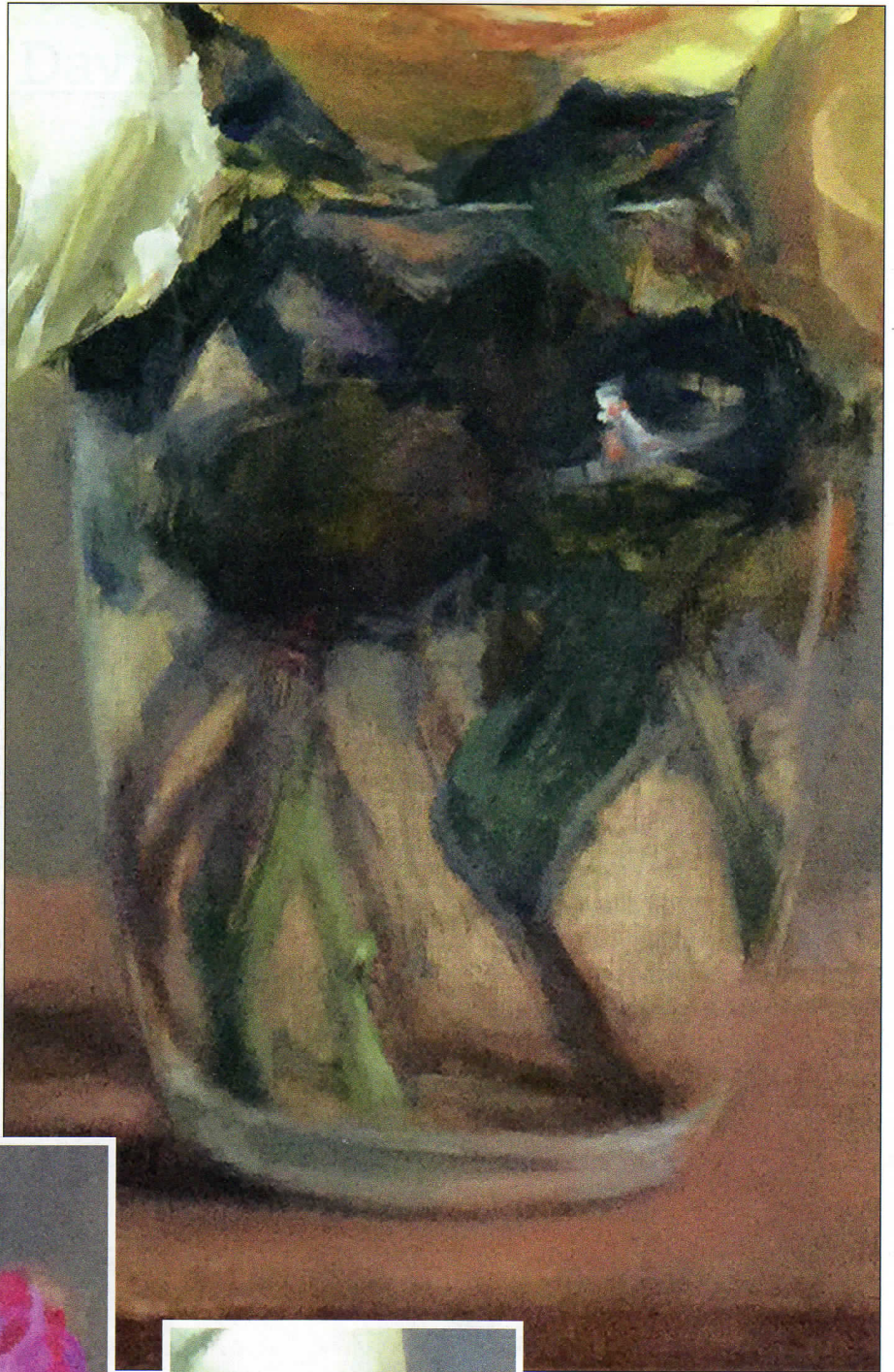
This stage shows continued progress on the white and yellow flowers. I “paint to finish” flowers—it is so important to capture them before they wilt or change too much, usually the first two days of a flower painting are dedicated to the flowers after establishing the value range of the rest of the painting seen in Stage 1.

Continued ▶

STAGE 4

FLOWERS ARE FINISHED

The flowers are completed. I will rarely go back and rework the petals and flowers once they are completed. By this time, the flowers have wilted and I can no longer paint what I see, so I do try to work quickly and efficiently while they last. It is a race against time. Some work begins on the glass vase, leaves and stem. The contrast between the lively natural blooms and the transparent reflective vase with water gives the painting surface interest, some mystery and depth. Some additional work is done on the surface table to enhance the values and cast shadows to give more solidity to objects inhabiting the space.





STAGE 5 FINISHING TOUCHES

David Austin Roses, oil on linen, 15 x 16" (38 x 41 cm)

The final painting maintains the initial concept of an animated and colorful central bloom in high contrast to the darkest darks of the leaves in the vase. The vase is handled with darks as a strong contrast next to the lighter and more colorful flower. The details and reflective light within the vase is handled with subtle tones to not take away from the flowers. It serves as a base for the main event. The viewer's eye goes straight to highest contrast between light and dark and sharpest detail.

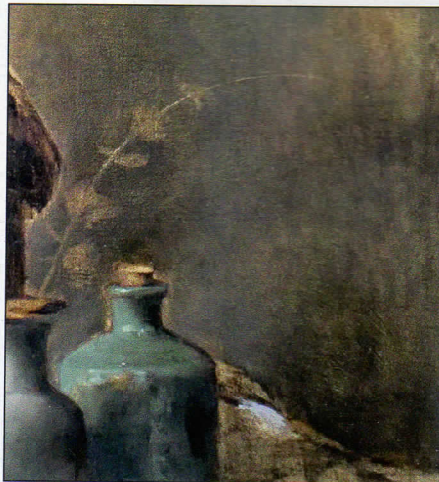
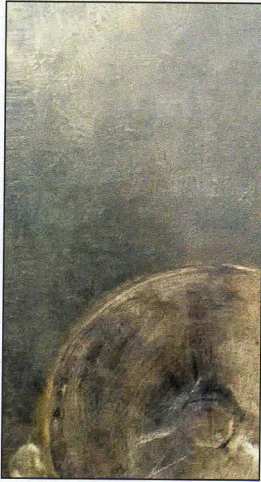
My Art in the Making #2 Tang Lady

The still life setup I am presenting for the demonstration of my technique consists of the main *Tang Lady* figurine and other oriental bowls, vases and bottles I collected during my many trips to China in the last decade. Every piece in the painting has a wonderful, fun story behind it. The trips there were so fascinating, and I got to see firsthand the real China, not the tourist China, while training young designers and artists. I have always had an appreciation for the art of China because of my art history study at Cornell University where the art history department is known for its scholarly courses in Chinese art. The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell has a permanent collection consisting largely of Chinese art and artifacts. My early introduction to this fascinating culture comes full circle in this painting called *Tang Lady*.

STAGE 1 THE BLOCK-IN

The block-in is essentially the most important part of a painting. Here I spend the most time in the process after spending time selecting and setting up the actual still life. In this case, the setting up of the still life took several hours. I had been living with these artifacts for a while and had a vision in my mind of how I wanted to paint these special objects of art and how to use the light and shadow as part of the composition elements. I usually begin with a prepared dry toned canvas of a thinned mixture of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. It is easier to create correct values in real life when the whiteness of primed canvas is eliminated. It is also easier on the eyes. The block-in consists of a carefully painted drawing plus massing in of darks of the same mixture. I thoughtfully draw in the framework and composition. The first session is completely dedicated to making sure everything is correctly placed, properly drawn and in a pleasing composition with correct perspective. The concept was to have the main Tang Lady figurine nestled among the other oriental pieces, while creating and interesting pattern of circles, ellipses, diagonals and triangles that will lead the viewer throughout the painting. Although the composition is complex with many elements, the color harmony of jades and earth tones will unite and simplify once the painting part begins.





STAGE 2 LAYING THE FOUNDATION

The second session begins with work on the background. With a broad bristle brush used for backgrounds and a large filbert, a neutral backdrop is built up and cast shadows from the figurine and other pieces are built up. The cast shadows are just as important as elements in the composition as the objects themselves. It is always best to work from back to front in any painting. I leave some of the canvas with an unfinished quality to evoke a sense of decay and the timeless theme of ancient art from an ancient culture. Once the backdrop has been established, I begin to paint individual objects and their foundations. Each color is mixed on my palette as I go, mixing what I need for each sequence. In addition, I will note the lightest light for future reference while establishing the correct values and color for other areas. In this case the lightest light is the reflection in the round upright jade bowl. Other lights are noted on each object. Remember that the intent is to "paint to finish," so each brushstroke is meant to stay and not be reworked, so the value, color and edges are there to stay and need to be as accurate as possible. In addition, each brushstroke is placed to capture the sense of the porcelain and surface of the objects. The harmony of the vertigris, jades, turquoise and earth tones is already uniting the complex structure to read as a more simplified one.

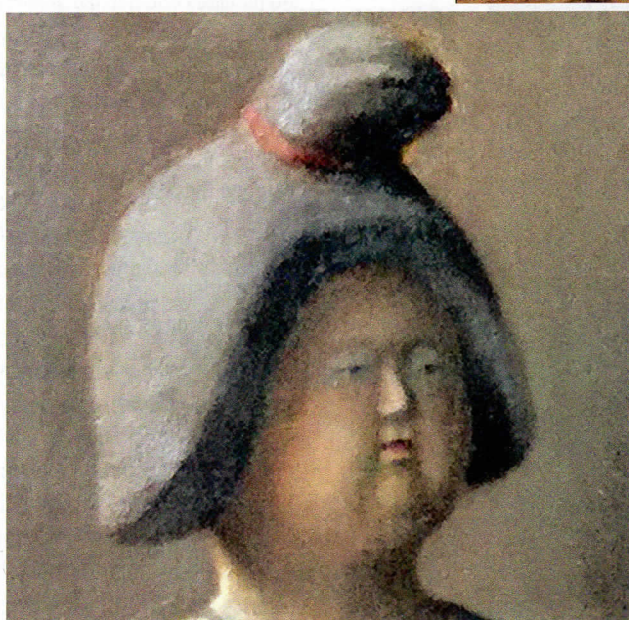


STAGE 3 CONTINUING THE FOUNDATION

In this session, much of what began in the second session continues, working throughout the painting in each area to get paint on the canvas, to create the sense of the surface on each object, to unite the overall composition in color harmony for a pleasing tranquil and quiet statement.

STAGE 4 THE FIGURINE

The painting is emerging after observing each area. In stage four, the figurine is worked on by building up the paint to recapture the sense of the shiny ceramic tri-color glaze finish used on these figurines from the Tang Dynasty. The foreground white cloth and eucalyptus branch are painted. Other areas are enhanced in the light areas with heavier opaque paint to make the light come forward. Details are enhanced in the foreground with some sharper edges which helps the viewer focus on the foreground before moving back into the painting. The reflective lunaria branch from the left is painted over the previously painted Qing Dynasty jade bowl. Note that the bowl was kept quite undefined with minimal detail so as not to compete with the leaves that will be placed in front of it in this session. Planning ahead and working in stages in a painting is important to how it will read in the end. Not everything needs to be painted with fine detail. Some areas need to be only suggested so that the viewer will be able to focus on where the painter intended for the eye to rest.



STAGE 5 FACE AND THE HEAD

The focus now is on the face and head of the Tang Lady figurine. The finish is in the details. The delicate features of the terracotta head area are hand painted unlike the ceramic glaze on the body of the figurine. Also, the light highlights the small nose and full cheek—signs of wealth and beauty in the Tang Dynasty. The large headdress casts a subtle shadow on the face. The Tang Lady and her Shih-Tzu dog are finally completed. By now the various porcelain vases and bowls are dry, so transparent blue washes are applied to mimic the hand painted blue and white appearance of the art objects. Finishing touches and details are finalized on the wooden table surface.

STAGE 6

FINAL ELEMENTS

Tang Lady, oil on linen,
20 x 21" (51 x 53 cm)

Finally the painting is completed after finishing the last branch of dried eucalyptus leaves coming from the front blue-and-white vase. The larger leaves emanating from the base are large and catch the light, then graduate smaller ending in a silhouette of small leaves on the lighter background. The entire painting is set up so that the geometry creates movement for the eye to move throughout the painting. The basic composition is a strong vertical of the figurine juxtaposed over diagonals that lead the viewer into the painting space on a diagonal line and then behind the figurine on another diagonal line. The eucalyptus branches, white cloth and round jade bowl give interest to that journey and mimic the movement.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Painter Ellen Buselli studied at the Tyler School of Art in Rome, Italy, Cornell University and the Art Students League of New York. She paints from a north light studio in an old 1890s brownstone, which mirrors her love of the last-turn-of-the-century art practices and painters such as Emil Carlsen and Henri Fantin-Latour. Her subject matter includes figure, portrait, still life, floral and landscape.

Her award-winning paintings have been in many of the Oil Painters of America national juried exhibitions including the 2019 *National Exhibition* in St. George, Utah, at the Illume Gallery. She has been awarded OPA's Best Still Life Award, Winsor & Newton Award of Excellence and the Richeson Silver Brush Award. She is a signature member of Oil Painters of America, a Master Signature member of American Women Artists, and a

member of the Portrait Society of America and Salmagundi Club.

In addition, her work has been selected for the prestigious Art Renewal Center Salons and traveling exhibitions (2018-2019), awarded the 2018 ARC Staff Award, and is was in the traveling exhibition 2019 that was shown at the Salmagundi Club, NYC, Sotheby's LA, and the Museum of Modern Art (MEAM) in Barcelona, Spain.

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