



Fred Wessel

Painting Flesh Tones

Fred Wessel uses age-old techniques to render lifelike skin tones in his egg tempera works

During a two-week trip to Italy in 1984, I was deeply touched by the art of the Italian Renaissance painters. I was unprepared for the sheer beauty and luminosity of the egg tempera medium adorned with gold, semi-precious stones and radiant pigments such as lapis lazuli and malachite. I was also

intrigued by the delicate, beautiful flesh tones these masters achieved by applying thin layers of varying warm colors over a cool green underpainting. In the course of my many years of teaching I have been asked numerous times about selecting the perfect color to render skin. My answer is always the same:

There is no perfect skin color—radiant flesh tones are created by the subtle juxtaposition of a series of warm and cool tones, working together locally in similar value. For me, this Renaissance practice of layering warm and cool, as detailed in the writings of Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*, is the perfect way to achieve my skin tones. Although my medium of choice is egg tempera, many of my students have adapted this cool underpainting technique to oils, acrylics, frescoes and even watercolors.

My paintings are always started by creating a full valued India ink drawing on a wooden panel prepared with a rabbit skin glue/whiting traditional gesso. Since I gild using the water gilding technique, all gold areas are gilded and burnished next. I now use a mixture of terra verde pigment mixed with a bit of titanium white to turn the skin areas of my ink drawing

Jacqui (Corona), egg tempera with 22k gold, silver and palladium leaf, 30 x 24" (76 x 61 cm)

This was the first piece in the *Constellation* series to utilize flowers and their negative spaces to accentuate a new design element in the gold background. In this case the figure, before the night sky crown of Corona Borealis, is surrounded by red maple leaves. The crown becomes ambiguous—is she wearing the crown or just standing before the constellation?

Libra, egg tempera with 22k gold, silver and palladium leaf, 24 x 18" (61 x 46 cm)

Libra incorporates "Angel's trumpet" or datura blossoms, which are point-down triangular shapes that mimic the point up triangle shapes in the scales. The constellation *Libra* appears in the night sky in the upper left.



My Art in the Making Delphinus

This is the newest painting in my *Constellation* series and celebrates Delphinus, the kite-shaped constellation, which is one of my favorites in the night sky. It juxtaposes the three-dimensionality of my model, Andrea, against the flat, map-like drawing of the star chart in the gold background. I am also playing the painted pearls on Andrea's gown against the actual pearls set into the painting.

The image will be worked up on the panel from a black-and-white grisaille drawing to a green-toned grisaille painting. After fortifying the very warm areas of the skin (apples) and redefining the shadow areas (verdaccio) the flesh tones are established using dilute colors on a well-dressed brush. The brush is dipped into the warm color, diluted with a bit of water then the excess color is removed before painting by stroking on a paper towel (approaching dry brush). The shadow areas will be redefined and the painting is brought up to completion.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Support

- » ½-inch Baltic birch cabinet grade plywood panel, covered with linen then prepared with a traditional gesso of rabbit skin glue and whiting.

Brushes

- » #2, #4 and #6 kolinsky sable brushes
- » ½-inch and ¾-inch soft flats for glazing

Colors

- » Various powdered pigments mixed with egg yolk.

Other Materials

- » Cultured Pearls
- » Gold leaf
- » Silver leaf
- » Palladium leaf
- » Silver "chasing" tools and punches (including leather punches)
- » Agate and dog tooth burnisher
- » Epoxy
- » India ink
- » Silverpoint



STAGE 1 THE INK UNDERPAINTING

Twenty cultured pearls were set into the gessoed panel with quick-set epoxy. I did an underdrawing in silverpoint then inked in the drawing using waterproof India ink diluted with water.

Continued



STAGE 2 GILDING THE BACKGROUND

All of the "star chart" area has been water gilded with 22k gold leaf over a ground of red Armenian bole mixed with rabbit skin glue. The gilding takes place on all areas that will not be painted later.



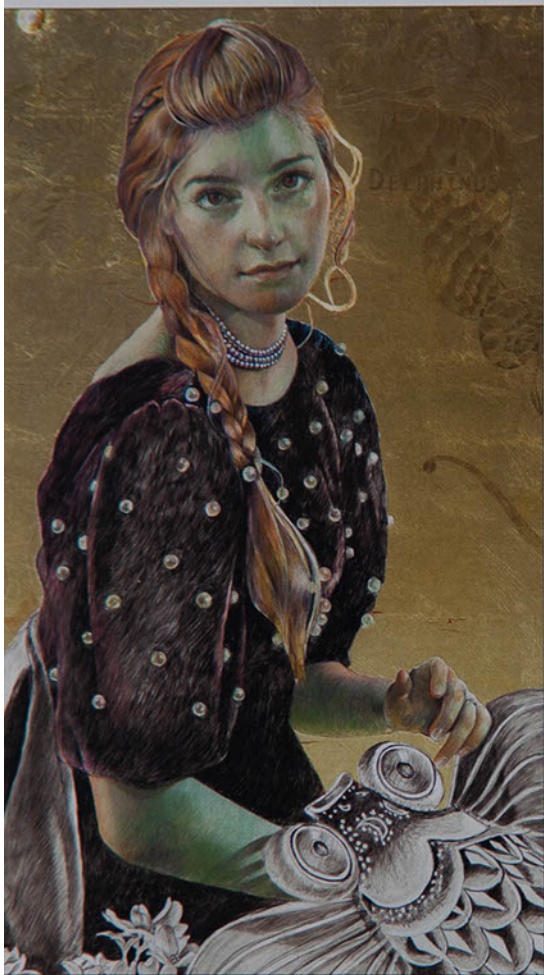
STAGE 3 THE GREEN UNDERPAINTING.

Using the #4 kolinsky sable I applied a number of thin coats of terra verde pigment mixed with titanium white (mixed to a mid-value) over all of the skin areas.

STAGE 4 THE VERDACCIO AND ADDING "APPLES ON THE CHEEKS"

I now work the shadow areas lightly with verdaccio. At this point I apply thin, watered down layers of warm colors over only the warmest areas of skin tones. I start with a red earth such as terra ercolano or pozzuoli red, then go all the way into a thin veil of cadmium red light.





STAGE 5 BUILDING LAYERS

Building up many thin layers of the appropriate value of the warm colors mentioned above I slowly remove the green in the warm areas of the skin and allow the green to "neutralize" the cooler areas.



STAGE 6 SHADOWS

Shadow areas of the skin are developed and the painting is worked up to completion. Burnt umber with a touch of ultramarine purple are mixed with lots of water and drybrushed over the shadow areas. The mixture is cooled further with ultramarine blue.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Fred Wessel is a professor emeritus at the Hartford Art School. He is represented by the Arden Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts; S.R. Brennen Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Scottsdale, Arizona; and ACA Galleries in New York, New York. Since 1985 he has had 17 solo exhibitions, including two at the Sherry French Gallery in New York City, seven at Arden Gallery, and a retrospective exhibition at the Evansville Museum in Indiana. His work has also been exhibited in more than 70 invitational exhibitions. Most recently he had six paintings included in a show titled *Gold* at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna, Austria. The show was organized around the work of Gustav Klimt.

Wessel's work is included in numerous private collections and more than 45 public collections including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Brooklyn Museum, New York; The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania; The Library of Congress; The DeCordova and Dana Museum of Art, Massachusetts; The Wichita Museum of Art, Kansas; Smith College Museum, Massachusetts; and The University of Tianjin Fine Arts College, People's Republic of China.

Wessel will be teaching a workshop in Assisi and Cortona, Italy, in the late spring of 2015 and a workshop at Whidbey Island Fine Art (Seattle, Washington) in the fall of 2015.

Contact at:

www.fredwessel.com
www.workshopsinitaly.com



STAGE 7 COMPLETED PAINTING

Delphinus, egg tempera on panel with cultured pearls, gold, silver and palladium leaf, 24 x 18" (61 x 46 cm)