



The Artist's Model

IN PART 3 OF THIS SERIES **DANIEL MAIDMAN** TELLS US HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF THE HUMANITY AND SKILL THE MODEL BRINGS TO THE STUDIO

On pages 23-25 of his book *The Art Spirit*, Robert Henri says: *“The most vital things in the look of a face...endure only for a moment. Work should be done from memory. The memory is of that vital moment... All work done from the subject thereafter must be no more than data-gathering. The subject is now in another mood. A new series of relations has been established. These may confound. The memory of that special look must be held, and the ‘subject’ can now only serve as an indifferent manikin of its former self. The picture must not become a patchwork of parts of various moods. The original mood must be held to... Were the student constantly in the habit of memory-practice there is little doubt but that he would dispense with the presence of the model at the time of the actual accomplishment of his work.”*

In this series of articles, we are assuming the opposite perspective: that the presence of the model contributes to the substance of the artwork throughout the process of making the work. This is important – the model is not a reference object, but a living, breathing person who informs your work so long as he or she is present. The work may have its origin in a flash of inspiration, but it evolves toward completion as a continuing collaboration between artist and model. Without the artist, it would never come to be; and without the model, it would be diminished, even crippled.

In previous articles, we’ve discussed finding and hiring models, and how to set up the studio space to optimize the work process. In these final articles we will discuss art-making itself, and how to make the best use of the humanity and skill your model offers you.



Choosing and refining the pose

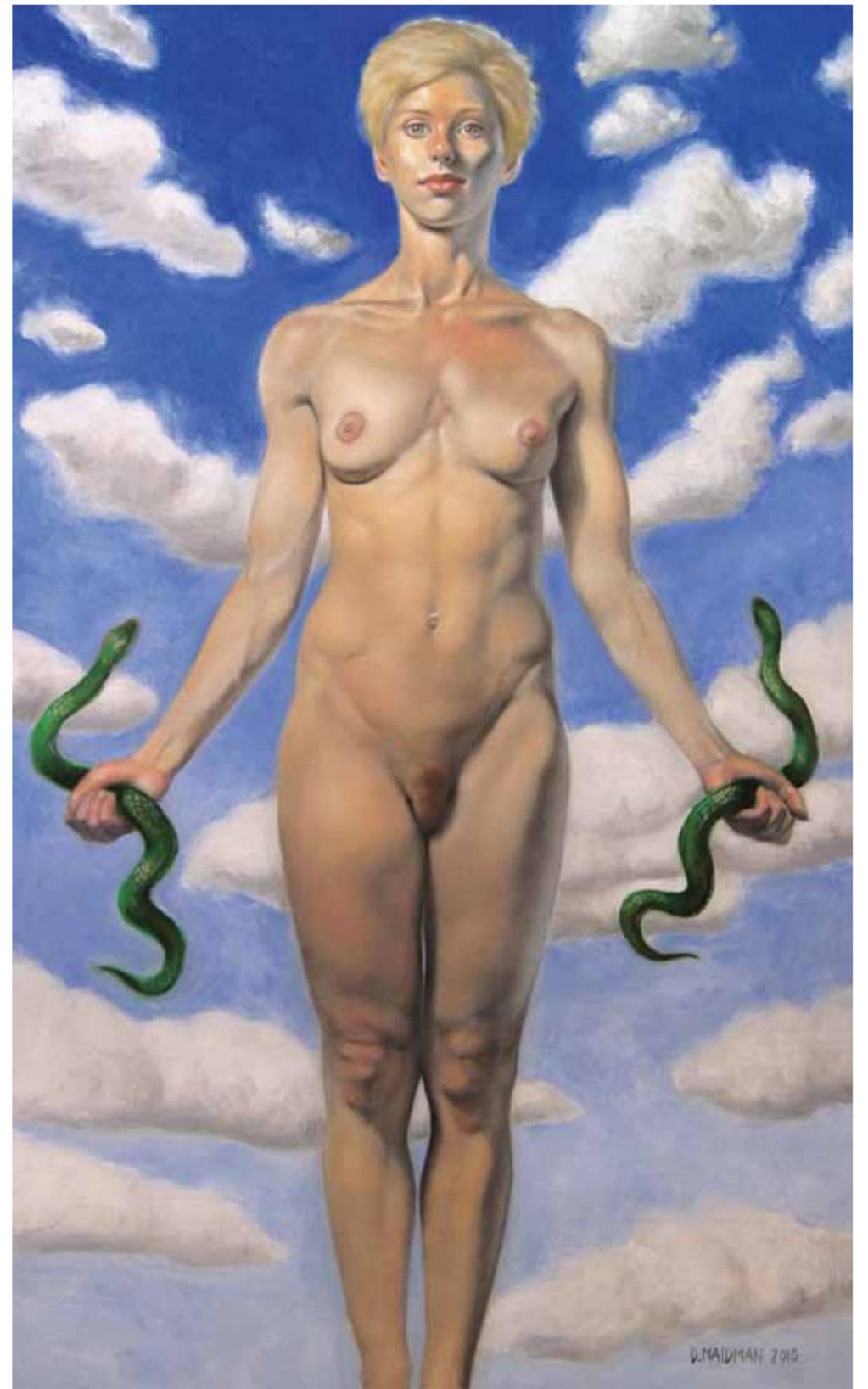
At the start of your work on your project, you will either have an idea for a piece, or be searching for one. If you’re searching for one, then it is obvious that you must seek a pose with the model. But if you’ve already got an idea, the reasons to refine the pose with the model are less clear. Let’s tackle them now by means of an example. Opposite is the rough thumbnail for the piece presented in the “Art in the Making” section in the previous article. I drew it before my first session with Alley, so I could show her what I was going for:

Obviously, I had an idea for the pose. And I had an idea for the mood of the piece too – sharp and confrontational, cold in tone but high in energy, sexy and reckless. This mood was suggested by my impression of Alley from life-drawing workshops. My thumbnail reflects my idea for how to capture that mood.

At the start of every painting, I do a three-hour preparatory sketch. At left the sketch for the painting:

Well, I got done with that, and I wasn’t happy at all. Sure, it was grossly out of proportion, but worse, it looked static and boring. I couldn’t figure out what to do. But by then, Alley had grasped my goal for the painting, and she suggested some changes to the pose to capture her interpretation of the mood I had in mind:

In my opinion, that is a lot better – she added a lateral curve to the spine and threw her turned chin up, not down. And that was exactly what the idea needed, so I followed her lead in the painting.



The Minoan, oil on canvas, 60 x 36" (153 x 92cm), collection of Howard Tullman
This is a painting of Manou, a dancer. Manou’s seven hours of daily rehearsal have sculpted her body into the condition you see here. Her habits of discipline display an astonishing intensity of purpose. I designed this painting to investigate her nearly frightening focus.



This is the first sketch for a painting of Luke Guttsell, a talented dancer and choreographer I have had the pleasure of working with several times. My idea for the painting was anger – but this pose just didn't work. Why not? Two reasons: it was incredibly painful for him to hold for an extended period, and it was too dramatic for my own sensibility once I saw it in real life.



So we started over, brainstorming a few ideas and settling on this one. That's much better – a simple pose to hold, and one more in keeping with my own sense of compositional stability.

The importance of the preparatory sketch

This example illustrates part of what makes the preparatory sketch so important. Yes, it's expensive to hire the model for another session. But it's worth it. Here are some of the main reasons why:

- It lets you produce a low-cost image that shows you how your idea for the artwork will look. An artwork takes a lot of time to make, but a three-hour sketch gives you a good idea if it's going to work. It tests your inspiration against physical reality, and when your inspiration doesn't measure up, it gives you a chance to revise your idea.
- It allows you and your model to figure out if the pose you have in mind is physically possible. I once proposed a pose where the model's center of gravity was outside of her body. After fifteen minutes, she said, "I can't do this." Good thing I was drawing on paper instead of painting on a five-foot canvas!
- Beyond the problem of impossible poses, the three-hour preparation allows the model to figure out where an acceptable pose hurts. This helps the model to identify which body parts need to leave the pose when

you're not actively painting them, and that means you can plan your work better to minimize model pain and fatigue. Even if you don't care about their pain and fatigue, remember – the happier they are, the better the work they can do for you.

- Three hours is enough time for the model to settle into the pose. This is of key importance for the humanity of your work. A photograph captures an instant, and in an instant, the body can do all kinds of exciting transitory things. Art takes weeks or months. If you want the figure in your work to deeply inhabit their pose, to make the pose feel real and lived-in, then the model should have a sense of how their body accommodates the pose by the time you start the artwork. This is particularly important with regard to hands. After eyes, hands are the most expressive part of the body, and they take a while to find the place they want to be. If you build that time into



Anger, oil on canvas, 48 x 24" (122 x 60cm)
I based the final painting on the second pose, and I was very happy with how it turned out.

your preparatory process, the hands in your work will feel natural, and cue the viewer that the overall piece is "real," and not a forced or artificial image. Conversely, if you want a transitory feeling, the preparatory sketch will help you identify a list of qualities that give the pose that feeling - a clenched shoulder, perhaps, or a mouth slightly open - so you can ask the model to perform them again in the course of the work. Again, this isn't photography – to make it look spontaneous, you need to plan.

- As you draw the preparatory sketch, seeing your image instead of imagining it will give you a deeper insight into the emotions you are



Here I am working on a painting with Jordan, a model I met at a one-time workshop in lower Manhattan. This is my first painting of her, but I hope to work with her again. She's really fun to chat with and she brings a lot of energy and professionalism to her work.

Photography: Charlotte Sears

evoking. Sometimes this results in changing the emotions of the painting altogether. Sometimes it results in challenging you to find a better means to express the emotions you are seeking. With the model present, they are absorbing the emotions you want to convey, and they can start to bring their own creativity to the process. This almost always results in more vitality than your abstract idea alone can produce.

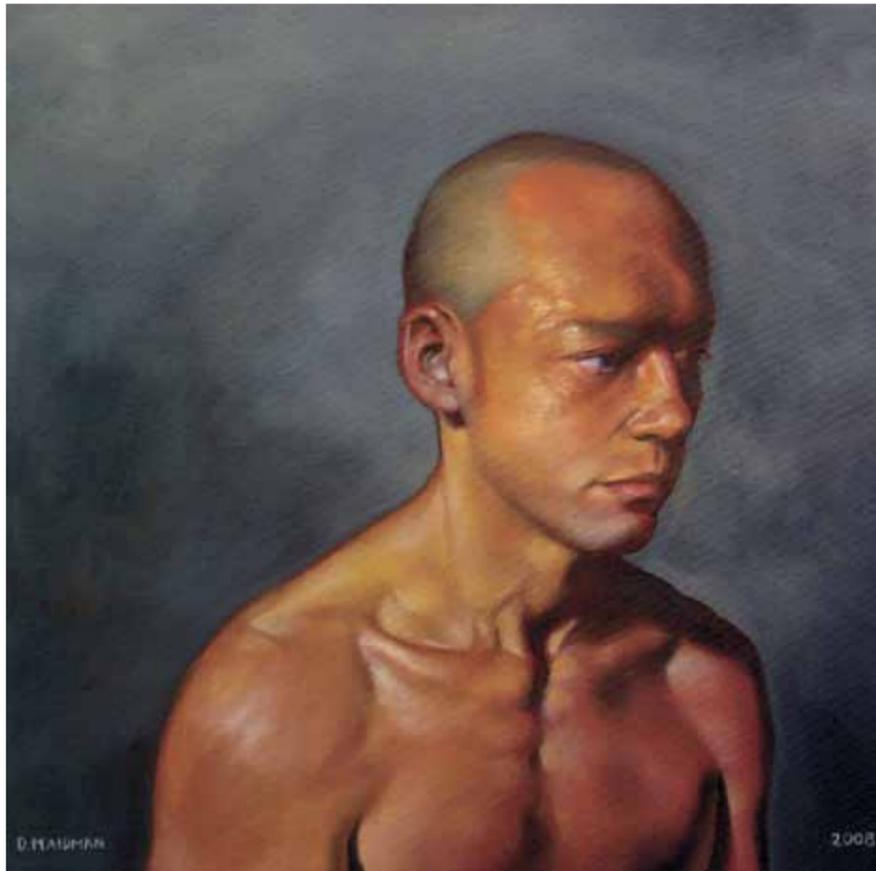
Here we can look at a couple examples of these principles in action. I hope these notes and examples help to demonstrate the importance of the preparatory sketch to a well-considered and fully-developed painting of a person. But no set of procedures will succeed in this task without the correct perspective and animating spirit. So let's talk a little bit about the difference between painting a person and a still-life.



This is my sketch for a painting of Chana Porter, a fascinating playwright and model. I actually liked this drawing quite a bit, but it wasn't what I wanted to show in the painting. This figure is soft, pliable, entirely warm. I saw Chana as more detached, more self-possessed.



Untitled 2, oil on canvas, 30 x 24" (76 x 60cm)
In this case, my drawing revealed a hidden tendency I had to soften Chana more than I wanted to. By discovering that pitfall while making the preparatory sketch, I was able to avoid making it in the painting.



Vadim One, oil on canvas, 20 x 20" (50 x 50cm)

Vadim is a Russian-Finnish actor with a lifetime of adventure to recount. Growing up in the Soviet Union, he saw much suffering, and this has given him both melancholy and a wry sense of humor. I tried here to explore the melancholy.



Tree of Life, oil on canvas, 48 x 24" (122 x 60cm)

This is my tenth painting of Piera, and a companion to *Tree of Knowledge*, printed in the last issue. I think Piera looks joyful and, well, full of life, when she takes poses like this, and based the painting on this quality.



The Messenger, oil on canvas, 28 x 22" (71 x 56cm)

This is my eighth painting of Piera. I based the angle and expression of her face on the angel Uriel in the Louvre version of Da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*. I have always found this angel uncanny, and I wanted to arrange a painting around the uncanny quality of beauty.

Painting a person, not a still-life

It is true that all things have a kind of soulfulness to them, and that to paint a good still-life, you must look deeply at a thing to see what makes it rich in life. But the life of an apple is not the life of a human. To paint the life of an apple, you must reach toward the apple, as deeply as you can; but the soul you find in it, in large part, your own. When you paint a human being, your subject reaches back toward you. It changes constantly, and though you may yearn to know it, it remains profoundly distinct from you.

To paint a human being, it is important to change what you think you are painting. To do that, you must ask yourself a question: what is a human being? Is a human being primarily a form? I would argue not. I would argue that a human being is a consciousness evolving in time, encased in a form. The

form makes visible the invisible interior. The form is tremendously expressive; but the depiction of the form serves our purpose only to the extent that it makes that evolving consciousness visible.

This is my attitude anyway, and you can judge for yourself the best I can make from it, in the work printed here. You're welcome to reach a different answer about what a human being is. But if you agree that what a human being isn't is form alone, then consider this re-ordering of priorities:

You are not primarily painting form, so you also aren't primarily painting any other element of the visual: not line, not shape, not color, not value. You are painting life, however you choose to define it.

There is a tremendous artistic vocabulary available for the expression of the visible. This vocabulary is gained

from learning to draw well, paint well, or sculpt well. It is gained from studying anatomy and art history and the techniques of the artists you admire. Education in this vocabulary provides your tool box, and if you have the urge to make vital figurative art, you will undertake the difficult task of earning your tools gladly.

But even though you must start with technique, you must not confuse technique with your goal. Your goal remains life, and once you are the master of your technique, life becomes your first priority again. Everything else serves it. All your tools serve it. And if any tool of yours is not serving it in the context of a particular piece, teach yourself to let the tool go. Your goal is not to flex your technical muscles, but to reach toward life. So learn to depict the physical, and then learn to sacrifice it.

Sacrifice accuracy of proportion – sacrifice correct tonal values – sacrifice the proper balance of warm and cool colors – sacrifice everything – only don't sacrifice life. There is no right or wrong way to get to life – remain awake as you work, and make your key choices

from the perspective of an artist depicting a human being, not a craftsman depicting an object.

In the next article, we will discuss the practical means by which to seek this life, in the studio, with your model and your art in front of you.

About the Artist

Daniel Maidman was born in 1975 in Toronto, Canada. He was raised in Toronto, Jerusalem, Washington, and Chicago.

Since attending college in North Carolina and Texas, Daniel Maidman has lived in Los Angeles and New York City. In Los Angeles, he set himself on a program to learn how to draw and paint the human figure. He attended life drawing workshops 2-3 times a week for eight years. As well, he spent two years working on an anatomical atlas based on human cadaver dissections in which he participated at Santa Monica College, under the guidance of Dr. Margarita Dell. Illustrations from his atlas are currently in use in the United States Army's forensic field manual.

After moving to New York in 2006, Daniel Maidman has sped up his painting schedule, while continuing to maintain his drawing skills through life drawing workshops at Spring Street Studio. Although he remains primarily self-taught, he has learned a good deal about the theory and practice of art from conversations with Stephen Wright and Adam Miller.

Daniel Maidman's other interests include filmmaking and writing.

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His work appeared at *The Great Nude Invitational Figurative Arts Fair* in New York City, May 13-16, 2010. www.thegreatnude.tv/invitational



Photography: Charlotte Sears