Learning to work in a brand new medium, like digital painting, is always intimidating before you try it. Fun when you begin doing it, and frustrating as hell when you begin trying to actually create art with it. I was fortunate that, several years ago, I took a couple of introductory classes in Photoshop at a local community college. This was on version 4.0, and we didn’t really learn anything about painting with it. But we did learn the basic functions and tools. In the years afterward, I only used the program for photo manipulation and correction. I knew that “digital painting” was out there, but I didn’t see much digital art that really impressed me, and no one definitely ever demonstrated steps, or a working procedure for doing it (not until recently, that is). And as it turns out, all I really needed was to see it demonstrated, to see how similar it can be to traditional media, like oils or acrylics. The process was de-mystified and a whole new world of possibilities was opened up to me.

Anyone who was at my lecture on caricature illustration at the Las Vegas convention heard me mention my school quite a bit, which I credit for whatever knowledge and skills I have up to this point. It is there, at the Watts Atelier in San Diego, California, where I have been studying drawing and painting from life for the past four years, as well as digital painting. Atelier schools are great way to learn and improve your art “skills,” for various reasons. But the most important thing when searching for a school or a teacher is finding instructors whose work and methods you respect and admire, so that you take seriously the lessons that they teach. And if they do come around and correct your drawing, they don’t actually mess it up. They should be willing to share their “secrets” and they should always be brutally honest with their critiques, otherwise, you are wasting your time and money.

The more digital painting I do, the more I am certain that experience with traditional painting and drawing is key to your success. The computer is a tool, like any other. It does not replace the need for skills. For example, making the switch from traditional (or analog) media to the digital realm is like switching over from oils to gouache. The two mediums feel and behave differently, but you can get similar results, in the end. And if you’re not successful in oil painting, there’s nothing about gouache that is going to help you compensate for your deficiency. Painting is painting. The same rules about procedure, value, and composition still apply. The other important lesson I’ve learned from spending time with charcoal and paints is that there is always a learning curve to anything new. It will always be frustrating just as you start to get experience in it. This is the time where it is most critical to continue honing away at it, and not give up because you are not getting instant results. Don’t retreat back into what is safe and familiar. Because if you do...there you will stay.

So with all that in mind, let us get into the process of painting using Photoshop (7). (The main points I will give are applicable to any painting program. Just the details and settings will be different.) And some options I describe may not be available in earlier versions of Photoshop.

You will also need a Wacom tablet and stylus. It is possible to work with a mouse, but you won’t have the subtle control over your brushes size and opacity with a mouse.

The biggest problem I see when people first try to paint digitally with no instruction is that it looks digital. It is overly smooth, sterile, and airbrushed. The second big problem is that the values do not work. After that, usually the colors are misused. They are either too chromatic and over-saturated, or milky, gray and de-saturated. Or even worse, there are saturated and de-saturated colors used indiscriminately all over the composition! And if there are issues with bad drawing and placement, you need to, forgive the pun...go back to the drawing board and work on your eye. Of course, if you still want to work on your painting at the same time, start by painting over a tracing of someone else’s work or a photograph. But be honest with yourself and continue to develop your drawing skills. Tracing can get you started so you can focus on the painting. But you don’t want to end up relying on it forever.

The best way to explain how to use a new medium, is simply to demonstrate and comment as I go.

So let’s begin with a simple tonal drawing. (fig.1)

This is how many classic illustrators, like Norman Rockwell, would proceed. They would work out the entire composition tonally in charcoal or graphite, so that the painting process would basically end up being a paint-by-numbers exercise. Relying on tried and true methods of past masters is always a good place to start. I ended up changing my drawing quite a bit because as I started painting, I realized the likeness was not very strong.

Step 1. Prepare your canvas and workspace

Open up your tonal drawing or line art in Photoshop. I reset my resolution somewhere in between 150 ppi and 300. Standard printing resolution for publication is 300. But if you have a slower system and less memory, use a lower resolu-
tion, or some brushstrokes will take a while to render. Also resize the canvas to the largest size you think you will want to print the artwork out. I have been doing 11 x 14 inches because that is the size of my portfolio.

Photoshop's tools can be accessed in two ways, the drop down menus at the top of your screen, and floating palettes. I work mostly with the floating palettes, and I only keep open the ones I frequently use. To control what floating palettes are visible, go to the menu at the top of your screen called Window. Make sure these following floating Palettes are open: Tools, Layers, Tool Presets, Options, Brushes, History, File Browser. These last four I keep docked to the Palette Well at the top of the screen to save on space, since I do not access them as much. In Photoshop 7 and above, you can dock palettes to the Well at the top of the screen by clicking the little triangle in the upper right corner of the floating palettes. Floating palettes can also be merged by clicking and drag-ging them together. The Navigator palette is also pretty useful for zooming in and out of your image as you work. (fig.2)

Step 2. Create custom brushes

Photoshop has many brushes to choose from. The Options palette changes according to whatever tool is currently active. When the Paintbrush tool is active, the Brush Options palette is accessible. Here you can choose different brushes or different groups of brushes, like Faux Finish, Natural, or Special Effects brushes. (fig.3)

This is where it gets a little tricky. I have created about ten different brushes. One at a time, I played with different brush settings, like Texture, Scattering, Shape Dynamics, and Dual Brush to the point where each brush has its own custom options to turn them from regular brushes into custom brushes that add a lot of visual "noise" to my strokes. The strokes look more like natural media. Once I am happy with a particular brush, I go to the Tool Presets palette, click on the little triangle in the upper right corner to access the drop-down menu and click on "New Tool Preset", this will open a new box where you are prompted to name your new custom brush. Choose a name that will remind you what that brush does, like "Streaky Large Textured Brush" or something. Repeat this process for each of your custom brushes that you want to set up. (fig.4)

Step 3. Begin painting!

Now that a few of the technical issues are out of the way, it's time to put those aside and think of this as a regular wet media painting. I do only wet-into-wet alla prima painting when I work with oils, so this is the approach I take when painting digitally. The other end of the spectrum would be how the old masters painted in transparent layers of paint built up gradually. I do not have the temperament for that though. And I prefer the look of a premier coup painting like Sargent or Sorolla anyway. But the beginning phases of my paintings do deal with transparent staining layers. This is how I go about it.

Step 3a. The transparent staining layer

In the Layers palette, create a New Layer on top of the drawing layer. With this New Layer selected, you will see the word "Normal" in a box at the top of the Layers palette. This describes the layer attributes. From that drop-down menu, choose Multiply or Overlay. (fig.5) Any painting done on a Multiply or Overlay layer will
Step 3b. The opaque layer

After the major areas are stained in, create a New Layer in the layers palette. This new third layer will be a Normal layer. (fig.7) This is where the real meat of the painting is laid down. I first go for my darks (the shadow patterns). I try to match the value of my opaque paint to the value of the underpainting beneath. (fig.8) And at this point, I use a brush that is opaque when you press firmly on the stylus, but translucent when you press lightly. In the Brushes palette, go to Other Dynamics and be sure Opacity Jitter is set to Pen Pressure. The sliding scale can be set anywhere you like. A higher percentage gives you more “holes” and noise in your brushstroke.

To select colors, I use only the Color Picker in the Tools palette. I do not use the preset Photoshop color swatches. Click on the foreground color swatch on the Tools palette to call up the Color Picker. Choose the right color with the appropriate level of value and saturation. (Note: Most flesh tones you work with will be darker and less saturated than you might imagine. Learn to interpret and judge value more accurately than color. Colors are very subjective. But if your values are incorrect, the painting will not work.)

Next, make the eyedropper tool your best friend. The eyedropper tool samples whatever color you click on and makes that the new foreground color on the Tools palette. When painting in Photoshop, one hand holds the stylus, and the other hand is always on the keyboard clicking away at the keyboard shortcuts. Memorize the most important shortcuts. They will become second nature. To alternate back and forth between your paintbrush and your eyedropper tool, simply hold down the Alt key (Option key for Mac users). I use this all the time when working on subtle values and colors. When you release the Alt/Option key, the eyedropper tool reverts back to the paintbrush.

Note: Do not rely simply on sampling colors from your original reference photo. To me, it’s pretty obvious when someone does that. Photographs are notoriously inconsistent and do not actually show how light really works. Contrast can be either too low or too high, and the dark shadows in a photo will almost always look black. The more you paint from life, the more intuitive your color selections will become, and you learn how light works. For instance, a good rule of thumb is: Warm light usually produces cool shadow colors, and cool light produces warm shadow colors. Shadows in real life are almost never devoid of color. They have some color properties, just as bright highlights have color to them.

Step 3c. Flatten the image and continue painting

Moving on in the painting, I eventually flatten the layers. I don’t like to have lots of layers while working (If I jump back and forth between them while painting, it gets a little confusing.) Now the painting is really starting to develop. I see that I am unhappy with the likeness, and I redraw some areas. (fig.9)

I thought I liked the face when I started, but the more I studied it, the more I realized I made some bad drawing decisions (Hey, it happens to everybody!) At this point, I am starting to refine my middle values and half tones. I am using mostly my streaky brush.
Note: the purest chroma (the most intense color) is usually in the transition zones between the darkest shadows and the middle values.

As I progress further and further into the painting, I usually stop choosing colors from the color picker, and simply choose colors from different areas of my composition. This helps keep the colors in the painting unified and atmospheric. I try not to introduce too many foreign colors into the painting when I am nearing the end. But don't hesitate to use the color picker to adjust the value or saturation of the existing colors. So I jump back and forth a lot between my paintbrush and my eyedropper tool from here on out.

Another note: if you use the Fill or Gradient fill to cover an area, be sure to continue painting over that by hand. It looks awkward to have a juicy and nicely painted face set against a mathematically precise gradient background color. It's jarring to see, and quite frankly, lazy.

During the first three-quarters of the painting process, I stay zoomed out as far as I can and paint the whole image at once, jumping from place to place. I do not like to zoom in until the final stages to refine certain areas. This is equivalent in traditional painting to using large brushes and bold strokes for as long as you possibly can. Do not start rendering details until the painting is working as a whole. This method actually is much faster too. Because if you spend six hours rendering one eye, and the values, or drawing, isn't correct in relationship to everything else, you are going to have to paint over it anyway and start again.

When I realized that I didn't like my drawing, I had to paint over all my nice work I had done to that point. I want the statement in the end to be one of subtlety and simplicity. The best paintings are the ones that look best from across the room. If you want to render fine details, that is up to you. Just make sure it works at a quick glance from a distance.

Finally, I get to my highlights, reflected lights, and other details, like the freckles. And I am basically finished with the rendering of the head. If I wanted to make this an illustration, I would continue painting the background. And if I need more room to paint, I can easily just add canvas to any side with the touch of a button.

(Illustration K)

I plan to continue working in digital, as well as oils. I think they feed off each other, and I learn a lot by going back and forth. Oils teaches me discipline and procedure. But digital shows me how bold and confident I can lay down color.

The process I have described here is what works for me with most things in Photoshop, there are several ways to get to the same end result. It is a highly versatile and customizable program, which, if used correctly, is simply just another artist's medium.

Some good rules to keep in mind:

Any painting should have a nice balance of hard and soft edges and a balance of straight and curved lines.

Keep the colors unified and harmonious.

Values are infinitely more important than color.

Be demanding of yourself throughout the painting. Don't start painting until you feel you have resolved the drawing. But don't be afraid to change and improve the drawing as you go.

Have a goal in mind for how you want your finished painting to look. Study the masters of the past for inspiration and direction. Paint in the way that inspires you.