Tell a Visual Story with an Historical Photograph

Stephen Towns often references photographs from the 1700s or 1800s. He uses these photographs as a basis for his paintings, which he creates on a large scale. To select the appropriate colors, he often does research so that his paintings are as close to accurate as possible. Not everything is depicted realistically. Stephen Towns adds gilded gold skies in the backgrounds of many of his paintings to create a specific mood and set the tone for the artwork.

In this project, you will select an historical black-and-white photo of an important person or place in your life—perhaps a family member, historical figure, or memorable place you would like to honor by making it the subject of your painting. You will use this photo to create your own artwork and tell the story of this image.

Description – Reverse Painting On Plexiglas
You will create a reverse painting on Plexiglas. The finished product will be revealed when you flip the Plexiglas over.

Materials
- An historical black-and-white photograph
- Acrylic paints
- Sharpie
- A piece of Plexiglas (Consider using Plexiglas from an unused picture frame.)
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Instructions

1. Find a black-and-white photograph of an important person or place in your life.

2. Enlarge the image to the size of your Plexiglas. You may also consider flipping the image because it will be shown in reverse in the final Plexiglas painting. Scan, enlarge, and print the photo or use your phone or camera to photograph the image and then print it out.

3. Tape your photograph to the back of a piece of Plexiglas, and set it down on a table so that you can see the image through the Plexiglas.

4. Use both thin and regular Sharpies to trace the outlines of the shapes in your photo. Use a thin sharpie for small details. For faces that appear small in your image, either use a thin sharpie or leave the face blank, as Stephen Towns does in some of his quilts. Mistakes can be fixed with a cotton swab and rubbing alcohol.

5. Unlike a traditional painting in which the face details would be painted last, in a reverse painting the details are painted first and the skin tone is painted next, over the top of the details.

6. Before adding color, consider how the color will help bring the story in your image to life. What colors might convey dignity? What colors might bring out respect? Consider the mood of the image or the mood you would like to bring out in the photograph. What colors may help viewers understand the story of this image?

7. Give your Sharpie marks time to dry while you set up your paints.

8. **This is a reverse painting so the order will be opposite to what you would do normally. In a reverse painting you will start the smallest details first and add progressively larger elements in layers.** Use a small brush and acrylic paint to add any details. For example: *paint the facial features; small white and yellow stripes to a shirt; clouds in the sky; the texture of grass; and patterns on walls, trees, or shrubs.*

9. Let the paint dry completely between each layer.

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Instructions (cont.)

10. Add your next layer moving to larger shapes and lines. It is okay to paint over the top of your dried first layer, because your final artwork will be revealed when you flip the Plexiglas over. Let dry before painting your next layer.

11. Add your final background colors by adding large blocks of color over the top of all of your existing lines and paint. For example: paint skin-tone over the top of your facial features, paint the entire sky blue over the top of already painted clouds, a solid green over the top of the grass or trees, blue over the top of all patterns of a shirt, etc.

12. The painting is meant to be viewed through the unpainted side of the Plexiglas.

13. Once your paint is dry, flip your Plexiglas over and carefully remove your photograph to reveal the final product!

- Share your painting with others.
- Tell them the story of the subject you selected to honor.
- Has creating this painting increased your appreciation of the subject?
- Were you able to communicate the mood you wanted to convey by selecting the colors for your painting?