

ASSORTED ROCKS AND SHELLS adorn the rural New Jersey studio of Lauren Tilden. This portrait and figure artist finds inspiration and solace in the out-of-doors and fills her studio with found objects—a tree branch, a fragment of pottery, a stone—culled from long walks. With large windows that frame the Elk Township countryside, the studio offers a tranquil place to observe changes in cloud formations, foliage and wildlife and has plenty of room for art books and postcards of masterworks.

Painted a neutral gray, the walls help the artist see color accurately, while the room's strong northern light source is ideal for painting the model. The atmosphere—peaceful, contemplative, unhurried—is like something from another era, and perhaps that is precisely the point.

While many artists of her generation are drawn to an edgy, discursive style, Tilden prefers the works of earlier masters. At age 28, she's bringing new life to traditional painting techniques and a renewed emphasis on painting the human spirit. "Not only is the human body anatomically fascinating to

**RIGHT:** Tilden studied Vermeer's method of painting backgrounds before including Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* behind the figures in ***Mother and Child*** (oil, 24x20). In this reworked composition of a Madonna and Child, the brightest light falls across the infant, while red beads symbolize the Crucifixion.

Embracing the limited palette of earlier masters, Lauren Tilden creates egg tempera effects with multiple oil glazes.

# a quiet light

BY MEREDITH E. LEWIS



draw and paint,” she says, “but capturing the personality and spirit behind the outward form provides both an exasperating and exhilarating challenge. In the current era, which often devalues humanity, one of my goals as a portrait artist is to bring value and worth back to the human being.”

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To see a preliminary study of *Mother and Child* (previous page), go to [www.artistsnetwork.com/article/tilden-studies-for-oil-paintings](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/article/tilden-studies-for-oil-paintings).

### Wyeth and Beyond

Growing up outside Philadelphia, Tilden discovered Andrew Wyeth at an early age. Her parents were both art teachers, and frequent trips to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Brandywine River Museum—with its unrivaled collection of works by three generations of Wyeths—along with a home filled with art books set the stage for Tilden’s later life choices. “There was a moment at age 16 when

I realized art can be transformational and purposeful,” she says. “At that point I committed to being an artist.”

While allusions to Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Vermeer can be traced in Tilden’s style, it is to Andrew Wyeth that she owes her greatest debt. “What I love about his work is the mood, the quietness and honesty. I love his barren winter landscapes and his depictions of the everyday people in his life.” Like Wyeth, she conveys characters in a way that integrates them with a landscape.

The legacy of Wyeth can also be seen in the surfaces of Tilden’s paintings—in the mottled effect and the diffuse light that create a natural-looking radiance in her compositions. She points out that Wyeth used egg tempera to create this luminosity that she strives to re-create



in oil. “I love the versatility of oil paint,” she says, “as it allows for the creation of transparent shadows and smooth, luminous flesh.”

Tilden developed her own technique through a gradual assimilation of those practiced by earlier masters, European and American alike. While working on her degree at the University of Delaware, in Newark, she took several art conservation classes, during which she had the opportunity to copy Italian frescos, Renaissance egg temperas and masterworks in oil, including a work by Vermeer. She admired the way Vermeer applied his paint and began to absorb his theories.

### Light on the Subject

To achieve the “glowing” effect that’s characteristic of her work, Tilden insists on



**ABOVE:** “The work of Jan Van Eyck influenced *Portrait of R. Miles* (oil, 14x11),” says Tilden. “I was interested in the strong, dignified profile against the flat background.”

**LEFT:** “*Futile Autonomy* (oil, 28x32) pays homage to Andrew Wyeth and his many paintings of solitary figures in a winter landscape,” says Tilden. The shadow in the lower-right corner—possibly the viewer’s shadow—adds mystery and also acts as a point of entry for the viewer. Needless to say, the model wasn’t willing to pose outdoors in the cold for an extended period, so Tilden relied on memory, imagination, sketches and photographs.

## Genesis and Finale of *Eve*

Creating the initial drawings and applying the final paint layers are Tilden’s favorite parts of the creative process. “I take pleasure in every phase of the drawing,” says Tilden, “from block-in to the ending contours. The final paint layers are also extremely rewarding; with them the beauty of the painting begins to materialize.”

For *Eve* (at bottom), Tilden created three preliminary studies: a full figure in pencil; a portrait (below, at right) to capture the facial expression and an oil *bozzetto* (sketch) to work out the composition, color and chiaroscuro (balance of light and shadow). She turned the portrait study to a vertical position, which she felt brought out the emotion in the features; the sketch is a finished piece of art.

For the actual oil painting of *Eve*, whose theme is mortality, Tilden used dark colors and dead branches to emphasize a stark atmosphere. At the same time, she took care to cultivate a ray of light to symbolize the struggle between sorrow and hope. The model posed in the studio, and Tilden created the background from her imagination.



**RIGHT:** *Study for Eve* (graphite, red and white chalk on toned paper, 22x18)

**BELOW:** *Eve* (oil, 38x42)





**LEFT:** “I didn’t originally intend to include the window or tree in *March Tree* (oil, 24x32),” says Tilden. “While I was working on the preliminary drawings, my father commented that the dead tree behind the model was a powerful element.”

a natural light source. She observes how the light is hitting the form, how the form is turning, and whether the light is reflected or coming from a single source.

For Tilden, the importance of light goes beyond the application of academic technique; rather, light affords a union between technique and theme, allowing for a point-of-entry to identity and self-expression. Inspired by Caravaggio and the way in which light snakes across the picture plane in the masterpiece *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, Tilden paints light to reflect her subject’s relationship to God and as a conduit for her own thoughts. “I love the philosophy of more traditional art,” she says, “the focus on the human figure and the lack of irony. Pre-20th-century art sees the human figure as something noble—and that’s what I want to capture in my paintings.”

Tilden arranges her model and the trappings of the scene until the design begins to take hold in her mind. She studies all the components in the arrangement—from the posture of the body to the shape of a worn accessory or background picture frame—and how they come together into a composition. At this early stage, she determines how the light should fall on her sitter. She chooses either a warm or a cool light source, and the shadows for that painting will be of the opposite temperature.

Distrustful of photographs, she prefers to work from life. Because her glazing technique

is so time-consuming, however, photographs help her remember details when models aren’t available for extended painting sessions.

### From the Ground Up

After establishing a preliminary sketch in graphite with red and white chalk on toned paper, Tilden prepares her panel with rabbitskin glue sizing followed by Gamblin gesso. “In my view,” says Tilden, “nothing surpasses working with a traditional gesso ground—the manner in which the oil paint lies and partially absorbs into the surface is ideal.”

She then applies the ground color, a thin layer of cold black mixed with warm yellow ochre, as an *imprimatura*. Building her signature luminosity begins here. “I start with a warm ground color,” says Tilden, “and I build up the light mass with cool, light tones. It’s all about layering to create depth in the painting and to allow the warmth to show through.”

With the ground established, Tilden transfers the drawing by way of a grid or tracing. She proceeds with a lean and thin underpainting, a flat layer in burnt sienna and cold black from which she wipes out the first indications of the light mass with paper towels. From this flat underpainting she eventually progresses to lean paint applied thickly that comprises the light mass. In fact, much of Tilden’s work betrays a slight dimensionality, whereby the paint of the light mass builds from the surface, while the shadow mass remains

### TERMS

**IMPRIMATURA:** a thin preliminary glaze used as an underpainting

**LIGHT MASS AND SHADOW MASS:** the larger areas of light or dark values in a composition

# Step by Step: Building Luminosity

BY LAUREN TILDEN

1. I applied the ground color, using cold black plus yellow ochre in a thin layer. After this dried, I transferred the drawing, using a grid.

2. For the underpainting I applied sienna and cold black to the surface in a thin layer. Then I wiped out the light mass with a paper towel. I painted the background thinly in a cool blue tone similar to the final background color, allowing for the establishment of relationships between the fleshtones and the background in subsequent steps.

3. Painting wet-into-wet, I built up the light mass, applying the paint in thick brushstrokes while working to capture variations in color temperature. Then I roughed in the initial layer of the shadow mass. For the transition from light mass to shadow mass, I used yellow ochre plus cold black mixed with a fleshtone. At this time I also adjusted the background color.

4. To establish the form and details of the hair, I blocked in the large areas of shadow and light with cold black mixed with burnt sienna and unbleached titanium white. I then carefully executed each highlighted hair with an extra-long liner brush. I darkened the shirt with a thin layer of cold black and burnt sienna and slightly adjusted the shadow mass in the face.

5. Once the dark layer of the shirt dried, I painted the shirt with ultramarine blue, cold black and unbleached titanium white, scumbling areas to let the underpainting to show through. I then applied an additional glaze to the shadow mass on the face and the background. Finally I added highlights on the face, completing *Portrait in Blue* (oil, 18x24).



## TILDEN ON TRANSFER BY TRACING

The drawing for *Portrait in Blue* was transferred with a grid, but sometimes I make a graphite tracing of the original drawing on tracing paper. Then I flip the tracing paper and retrace my lines on the opposite side of the paper, using a soft graphite pencil. Once more I flip the tracing paper, attach it to the surface and retrace the original lines. Some of the graphite on the opposite side of the paper adheres to my surface, thereby transferring the drawing.



#### WHAT IS SCUMBLING?

Scumbling is rubbing or scrubbing a thin layer of opaque or semiopaque paint over a dry area of paint so that the dry area is partially covered with broken color.

flat, thin and quiet in the Italian Renaissance manner.

Painting wet-into-wet allows Tilden to solidify the light mass and develop a range of color temperatures, a skill in which she excels. Although she generally uses more than three tube colors, she asserts, “It’s actually possible to create a portrait using only three oil paints: titanium white, cold black and burnt sienna. The variations in color temperature achieved by these three paints are amazing.” To capture detail and texture, she uses a “blotchy” or stippled paint application. She scumbles the edges of the wet light mass over the dry *imprimatura* of the shadow mass to create transition. Scumbling also helps Tilden achieve the turning of form.

When the surface of the light mass is dry, she paints the shadows in multiple layers of

glazes and also glazes the light mass to adjust the color temperature. The final layers involve still more glazing, scumbling and color temperature adjustments. Throughout the process, clothing, drapery and hair receive particularly heavy scumbling.

#### Secrets of Success

Tilden’s success is partially due to her patience. Her technique is neither showy nor quick, but instead relies on a steady hand, excellent draftsmanship and a great deal of staying power.

But perhaps her most effective accomplishment has been finding a balance between tradition and contemporary realism—and using this balance to present a convincing alternative to the ethos of our time. “Rembrandt painted people as unique

## Tilden’s Materials

**Surface:** Ampersand Hardbord or birch plywood panel, occasionally covered with linen

**Ground:** Rabbitskin glue and Gamblin traditional gesso mixed with distilled water, heated and applied in very thin layers

**Palette:** Williamsburg cold black, unbleached titanium white, stil de grain, nickel yellow; Maimeri terra di pozzuoli; Winsor & Newton titanium white, Cremnitz white, burnt sienna, yellow ochre; Grumbacher vermilion (50-year-old paint Tilden inherited from her grandmother)

**Mediums:** Winsor & Newton refined linseed oil and linseed stand oil; Sennelier Turner transparent medium

**Brushes:** filberts, round sables and hog bristle in a variety of sizes

**Drawing materials:** graphite pencils, red and white chalk, Hahnemühle toned Ingres paper, Strathmore bristol vellum white paper, plumb line, measuring stick, kneaded eraser, X-Acto knife and sandpaper (to sharpen pencils)

**RIGHT:** The loss of her grandmother inspired Tilden to paint *Vanitas* (oil, 20x16), a portrait of Tilden’s mother. Understanding the inevitability of aging and death, the artist depicted her mother turning away from a mirror, symbolic of earthly vanity, in favor of emphasizing a true, spiritual beauty.



and special creations of God,” she notes. “It’s my objective to follow in his footsteps. I love to find beauty in people of all ages and backgrounds, which is in direct opposition to the standards of beauty set in today’s culture.”

Yet Tilden takes care to ground her work in the present. Her subjects are often family and friends from within her circle, and she paints her models in contemporary attire. “I paint the people I know and the experiences in my life,” she says, noting that to try to make her paintings look either old or avant-garde would render them false. “I try to paint what’s around me and paint it in a way that’s honest.” ■

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## Meet Lauren Tilden

“While in a gallery,” says Lauren Tilden, “I asked an art collector whose work he had in his collection. He replied, ‘I have a Lauren Tilden. My wife loves it, but I think the hand in the portrait is too big.’” Tilden then adds: “You know what? He was right!” Always eager to improve her craft, Tilden finds inspiration in the works of contemporary and historical masters alike. After completing her studies at the University of Delaware, in Newark, she received a master of fine arts degree from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia, where she studied under Sidney Goodman, Vincent Desiderio and Patrick Connors. A recent grant recipient from the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, Tilden currently shows with Artists’ House Gallery, in Philadelphia. For more information, visit the artist’s website: [www.laurentilden.com](http://www.laurentilden.com).



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To see more of Tilden’s art, go to [www.artistsnetwork.com/article/lauren-tilden](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/article/lauren-tilden).

**LEFT:** Artists’ House Gallery in Philadelphia had an exhibition titled “After Cézanne,” for which Tilden created *Hortense* (oil, 24x17½). “I found the task of encapsulating aspects of Cézanne’s techniques in my own painting daunting,” says Tilden. “How can a classically bent artist apply the relativity of Cézanne’s perception? Ironically, this was also Cézanne’s challenge.” Focusing on Cézanne’s *Hortense Fiquet in a Stripped Skirt*, Tilden re-created that tension by combining her love of chiaroscuro and narrative with Cézanne’s patchlike brushwork, slightly skewed perspective, and philosophy of finding structure and geometry in nature.