

the *MasterDemos*

# HORSE PORTRAITURE

*workbook*



with artist SARAH DEAN

# CONTENTS

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- 01 **INTRO:** HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK
- 02 **PART 1:** GETTING STARTED | *Episode 1-7*
- 07 **PART 2:** SIMPLIFYING YOUR PAINTING | *Episode 8-11*
- 11 **PART 3:** PAINTING THE DETAILS | *Episode 12-17*
- 14 **BONUS:** AVOIDING COMMON MISTAKES



# HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

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The sections of this workbook are designed as companion pieces to the three parts of Sarah's MasterDemo:

**Part 1:** Getting Started & Mixing Colors (*ep. 1-7*)

**Part 2:** Painting the Large Shapes (*ep. 8-11*)

**Part 3:** Painting the Details (*ep. 12-17*)

To get the most out of the MasterDemo episodes, we recommend following along in the workbook as you watch.

This workbook also serves as a standalone reference guide that's packed full of tips and insights Sarah shared during filming.

However you choose to use it, we hope this workbook elevates the experience for you and helps reinforce what you're learning.

Now let's get started!



# PART 1

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GETTING STARTED & MIXING COLORS (Episode 1-7)

## Before you paint

Having the right materials is an essential part of setting yourself up for success.

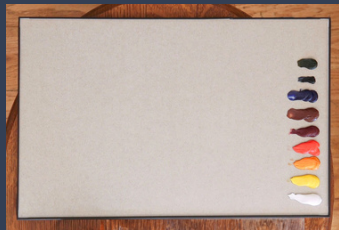
Sarah will be using an 11x14" stretched canvas, but you are welcome to use linen, board, panel, or whatever you're most comfortable with.

If you plan to paint along, be sure you have your canvas **sketched out**.



Next, affix your sketch with a very thin coat of clear acrylic spray, and **add your underpainting**.

You can watch the process here:  
[How to Prime a Canvas](#)



### PRO TIP: The Beauty of a Limited Palette

Sarah prefers a limited yet versatile palette, avoiding black paint and instead mixing deep, rich shadows using complementary colors.

## Colors

These are the colors on Sarah's palette every single day, no matter what she's painting:



## Brushes

Use the largest brushes you can for your canvas size!

For an 11x14" canvas, Sarah recommends:



filbert, size 4 & 6



bright, size 4 & 6



round, size 1



palette knife



### PRO TIP: Experiment with your tools

Using the **edge of a filbert brush** can help define individual hairs without excessive detailing.

A **palette knife** can introduce unexpected textures and enhance spontaneity in your work.

## Mixing Colors

Starting with episode 2 of her MasterDemo, Sarah demonstrates how she pre-mixes the puddles of paint she will need for the piece.

This makes the painting process more efficient and frees her up to stay in the flow without constantly slowing down to mix colors.



As Sarah mixes, she gets **realtime feedback** by holding up a spot of the mixed color to the reference photo. This is a great way to quickly learn the process of mixing accurate colors.



### PRO TIP: Avoid black and gray

Instead of reaching for black, Sarah mixes darks using **blues, purples, and warm earth tones**. This creates a more vibrant and natural depth.

When toning down bright colors, she uses **complementary hues** rather than adding gray, which preserves the saturation and life of the painting.

## Digging Deeper: Part 1 Exercises

*Put your knowledge into practice with these practical exercises.*

As you hone your color mixing skills and develop a discerning eye for subjects that inspire you, you'll set yourself up for enjoyable painting sessions again and again.

### 1. Find 5 reference images that excite you

*As you search for reference images, keep these questions in mind:*

- *Why am I drawn to this image?*
- *How can I simplify this composition?*
- *What part of this image would I want to draw attention to in the final painting?*

### 2. Color Mixing Practice

*For this exercise, focus on mixing a full palette of color for one of your reference images. Try to mix the minimum number of shades you need for each area (for example, the horse's coat, mane, and muzzle are usually their own separate areas). Regularly hold up your brush with the paint mixture to compare it directly to the reference photo, ensuring accuracy in both color and value. This is also a good time to practice keeping track of what color goes where, so you don't get lost when you go to paint later!*



# PART 2

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SIMPLIFYING YOUR PAINTING (Episode 8-11)

## Simplifying Your Painting

Sarah's expressive brushwork is a defining feature of her horse portraits, and that all starts with being able to break down a portrait into its most basic shapes.

Sarah starts every painting by blocking in the large areas of color. This is crucial, even though it can be tempting to go right to the details!



### PRO TIP: Visible Brushstrokes

Leaning into **visible brushwork** adds **depth and texture** to the horse's coat, mimicking natural variations in light and fur.



## Getting the values right

By blocking in large shapes first, you set yourself up for success. Establishing values early helps maintain a strong composition and prevents the painting from becoming too light or too dark in certain areas.



◦ A **warm underpainting** can unify the color scheme and add richness to the final piece.

## Digging Deeper: Part 2 Exercises

*Put your knowledge into practice with these practical exercises.*

As you train your eye to simplify images into big shapes, you will develop the skills needed for a strong start on every painting.

### 1. Squint to simplify shapes and value structure

*While observing a reference, squint to reduce detail. Focus only on the big shapes and values. Then, sketch or paint these simplified shapes without worrying about any fine details.*

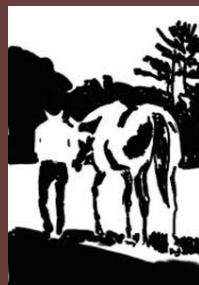
*Try squinting at various objects and scenes as you go about your day. You'll be amazed at how it trains your brain to observe in new ways!*

### 2. Notan practice

*"Notan" is a Japanese word for "light-dark harmony."*

*Print out a reference image and use a black marker or crayon to indicate the dark shapes. Anything that isn't a dark is by default a light. Next, create a notan from scratch on a blank page.*

*This exercise forces you to focus on the balance of light and dark in a scene without getting distracted by details. The squinting technique will help a lot with this one!*



# PART 3

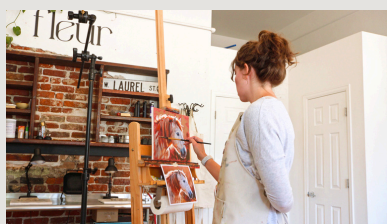
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PAINTING THE DETAILS (Episode 12-17)

## Painting the Details

A successful horse portrait has more than technical accuracy—it captures the essence and personality of the subject. Sarah’s finishing techniques focus on getting the horse to really pop off the canvas with minimal detailing.

Highlights should be **saved until last** to ensure that they don’t get muddy during the painting process.



**PRO TIP: Get a fresh perspective**

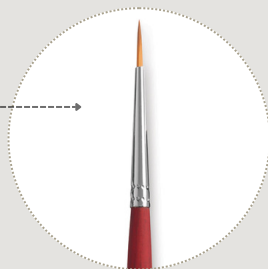
**Stepping back often** to assess the entire composition will help keep you from getting too bogged down in unnecessary details.



## The Final Details

Now is the time to use your smaller brushes to add any smaller details that you feel the portrait would be incomplete without. Reflections in the eye, pops of color, and pure white highlights will really bring your portrait to life.

Don't forget to apply these touches sparingly! Your goal is to suggest just enough detail that the viewers' eye will fill in the blanks, and your finished piece will appear more intricate than it really is.



For this painting, the only time Sarah used her **round brush** was for the eye and muzzle details.



## Digging Deeper: Part 3 Exercises

*Put your knowledge into practice with these practical exercises.*

Learning how to lay in small details, highlights and textures will help you create paintings that have a special sense of character and vitality.

### 1. Brush control exercise:

*Practice making strokes of various widths and textures with each of your different brushes. Try to create at least five different looks per brush. Experiment with the amount of paint you load on your brush, how much pressure you apply, and what part of the brush is touching the canvas.*

### 2. Gradation & blending exercise:

*Choose two contrasting colors, one light and one dark. On a clean surface, start with a 2x2 inch square of the dark color on the left and a 2x2 inch square the light color on the right, about 6 inches apart. Make the colors gradually fade into each other and focus on creating a seamless transition without visible lines. Vary your brush pressure to control the smoothness of the blend, and repeat with different color pairs.*



# BONUS

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AVOIDING COMMON MISTAKES

## BONUS: Avoiding Common Mistakes

Even experienced artists face challenges. Here are some of the most common pitfalls and Sarah's tips for how to fix them.

### Mistake

### Remedies

#### Muddy colors

- Avoid mixing too many colors together
- Mix purposefully
- Use confident strokes & don't over-blend on the canvas

#### Incorrect proportions

- Flip the canvas (or look at it in a mirror) to spot asymmetry
- Measure key landmarks, such as the distance between the eyes and the tip of the muzzle

#### Overworking the painting

- Relax! One of the hardest skills to develop is knowing when a painting is finished
- Step back frequently for a new perspective
- Make final adjustments with fresh eyes after a short break, or even the following day

## Digging Deeper: Bonus Exercises

*Put your knowledge into practice with these final practical exercises.*



### The (extremely) limited palette

*Choose a simple subject and paint a small study using only the primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) plus white. Mix all your colors from these limited hues, focusing on value, temperature shifts, and subtle variations.*

*This exercise trains your eye to see relationships between colors and improves your ability to create harmony and unity in your paintings. Try different primary combinations to explore their unique effects. You'll be amazed at how much these colors can do!*

### Brushwork & texture studies

*Create a series of small, quick studies (4x4 inches or so) using a single subject. Focus solely on brushwork and texture—experiment with different brush sizes, pressure, and stroke direction to convey form and energy. Try layering thickly, dry brushing, and soft blending to see how each technique affects the surface.*

*This exercise helps you develop expressive mark-making and adds depth and character to your paintings.*

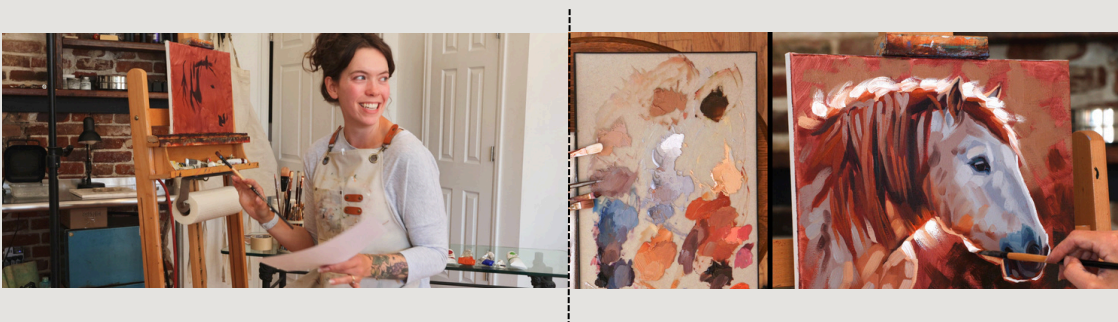
# YOU DID IT! (BUT IT'S NOT OVER YET)

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Spoiler alert: artists never stop learning. They never “arrive.” They’re always improving and refining and finding new things to discover and enjoy about the process.

Keep exploring new techniques, and don’t be afraid to experiment—every brushstroke brings you closer to mastery.

Whether you just finished your first painting or you have thousands of works of art to your name, congratulations to you and cheers to the journey ahead!



## JOIN THE CONVERSATION AND GET MOTIVATED!

Share your progress and connect with other artists  
(and Sarah Dean herself!) in the exclusive  
MasterDemos [Horse Portraiture](#) community.

