How to Draw a Portrait (Step by Step for Beginners)

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A fully illustrated 36-step guide to drawing a believable portrait from a photo: set up the reference, block in the head, place the features, build value, and finish with a likeness check.

Phase 1 — Set Up and Measure

1. **Pick a photo with clear, even light**
   Pick a photo with clear, even light.
2. **Print it and crop to the head**
   Print it and crop to the head.
3. **Mark the photo with a light grid**
   Mark the photo with a light grid.
4. **Set the paper at the same angle**
   Set the paper at the same angle.
5. **Establish the light direction**
   Establish the light direction.
6. **Draw the enclosing oval**
   Draw the enclosing oval.
7. **Mark the centre line**
   Mark the centre line.
8. **Place the eye line at mid-height**
   Place the eye line at mid-height.
9. **Divide the lower third**
   Divide the lower third.
10. **Check the width against the grid**
    Check the width against the grid.

Phase 2 — Place the Features

11. **Space the eyes one eye-width apart**
    Space the eyes one eye-width apart.
12. **Sketch the eye sockets as simple shapes**
    Sketch the eye sockets as simple shapes.
13. **Angle the nose from the brow to the tip**
    Angle the nose from the brow to the tip.
14. **Set the mouth on its own line**
    Set the mouth on its own line.
15. **Locate the ears and jaw corners**
    Locate the ears and jaw corners.

16. **Treat hair as one large mass**

    Treat hair as one large mass.

17. **Break the mass into a few clumps**

    Break the mass into a few clumps.

18. **Draw the neck as a cylinder**

    Draw the neck as a cylinder.

19. **Place the shoulders and collar**

    Place the shoulders and collar.

Phase 3 — Build Light and Form

20. **Map the light and shadow sides**

    Map the light and shadow sides.

21. **Add the core shadow under the features**

    Add the core shadow under the features.

22. **Keep the highlights as untouched paper**

    Keep the highlights as untouched paper.

23. **Soften the shadow edge**

    Soften the shadow edge.

24. **Shade the eye sockets, not the eyeballs**

    Shade the eye sockets, not the eyeballs.

25. **Give the nose a lit and dark side**

    Give the nose a lit and dark side.

26. **Round the lips with a soft centre line**

    Round the lips with a soft centre line.

27. **Deepen the hair mass selectively**

    Deepen the hair mass selectively.

28. **Lift with a kneaded eraser**

    Lift with a kneaded eraser.

Phase 4 — Refine the Likeness

29. **Put the darkest darks in last**

    Put the darkest darks in last.

30. **Refine one eye, then match the other**

    Refine one eye, then match the other.

31. **Check the negative space**

    Check the negative space.

32. **Compare with a mirror and a squint**

    Compare with a mirror and a squint.

33. **Fix likeness at the landmarks**

    Fix likeness at the landmarks.

34. Sign and date when it reads at a glance

Sign and date when it reads at a glance.

35. Redraw the same photo a second time

Redraw the same photo a second time.

36. Keep a small gesture-sketch habit

Keep a small gesture-sketch habit.

Sources

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Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Draw-a-Portrait. Corrections: https://www.howcompass.com/correction