Portraits – Notes and Skills Exercises – Intermediate & Senior

The Archibald Prize

The history of portraiture is very long and varied. This term we are looking at examples from the Archibald Prize, which is an Australian portrait prize that runs every year and is the most famous art prize in Australia.

The Archibald Prize was first awarded in 1921 and the original prize money was £400. Today, the main prize is worth a huge $100,000!

The Young Archies is a prize awarded to students between the ages of 5-18 years old, split into different age groups. You can find more information about who is eligible and how to enter here:
https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/young-archie/enter/

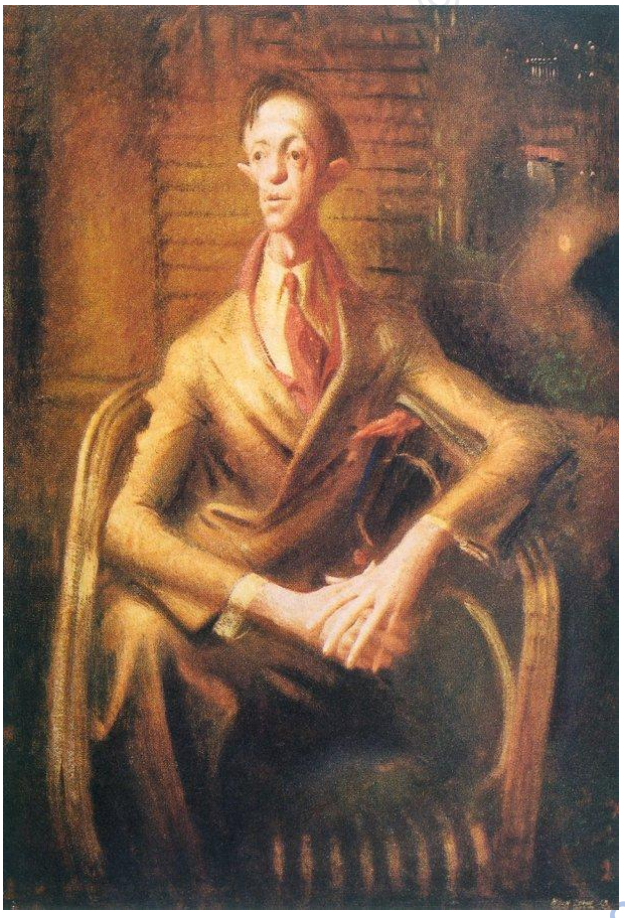
Hundreds of artists enter the Archibald Prize every year, and there have been many times in the past that people or other artists have complained about the winner.

One very famous incident involved artist William Dobell and his subject, Joshua Smith. Dobell won the main Archibald prize with his portrait of Smith in 1943, but there was a court case as it was said that the painting was a "caricature", not a "portrait".

Caricature or Portrait?

What is the difference between a caricature and a portrait? They are both types of art that depict people, but they have slightly different goals. A portrait is designed to be an image of a specific person, usually trying to capture a "likeness" - meaning it should really look like that person. A caricature is still designed to look like a specific person or people, but it is distorted or exaggerated to either entertain an audience or make a social or political comment.

Take a look at William Dobell's painting *"Portrait of an Artist (Joshua Smith)"* 1943 alongside a photograph of Joshua Smith. Do you think it was meant to be a portrait or a caricature?



In the end, the court case was dismissed and Dobell retained his prize. But the amount of media attention and people calling the painting horrible and ugly broke William Dobell and Joshua Smith's friendship forever.

What Makes a Caricature?

A caricature should still look like the person you're trying to draw or paint, but it will be distorting or exaggerating their features to make them look funny or silly. Below is an example of a famous person and a caricature of them.

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson

Caricature by Jason Horning

Compare the photo to the painting and answer the following questions:

1. Is the picture realistic?
2. Does it look like the person?
3. What parts look similar or the same? *Think about different facial features, like eyes, nose, mouth, ears…*
4. What parts look different?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Create Your Own!

Now find a photo reference of a famous person (your choice!) and make a caricature of them. You can do a line drawing or use coloured pencils or paint.

Look for what parts of their face stand out the most, or the parts you notice the most. Do they have big ears? A long nose? Big eyebrows? Look at the shape of their head - is it round, oval, square or something else? Write a list of the parts of the face you want to make bigger or more exaggerated. Then, create a caricature based on their face in the space below.

Name of the person you are drawing:

_____

Seeing Exercise - Literal versus Visual

Although we might exaggerate or enhance facial features in our portraits a little bit, normally we are trying to capture what we see in front of us. An important part of this is understanding the difference between what we *actually* see with our eyes and what we *think* we see. In his book "The Practice and Science of Drawing", Harold Speed describes this as the difference between the "literal" and the "visual".

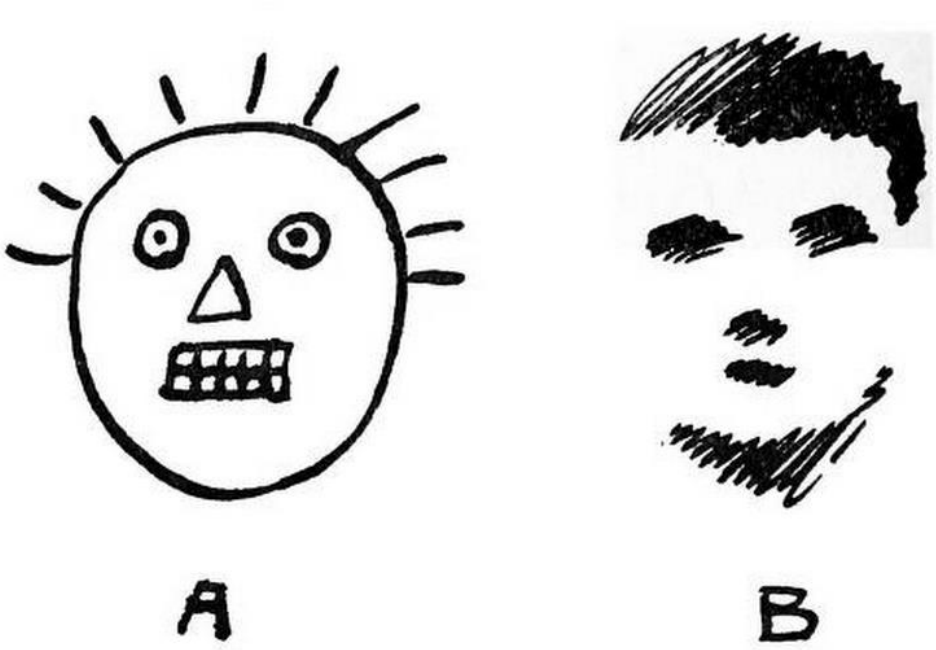


Diagram I

In the diagram above, on the left is an *idea* of what a face looks like. It shows all of the "parts" of the face, like the eyes, nose, mouth, teeth and hair, but it doesn't look like a realistic face.

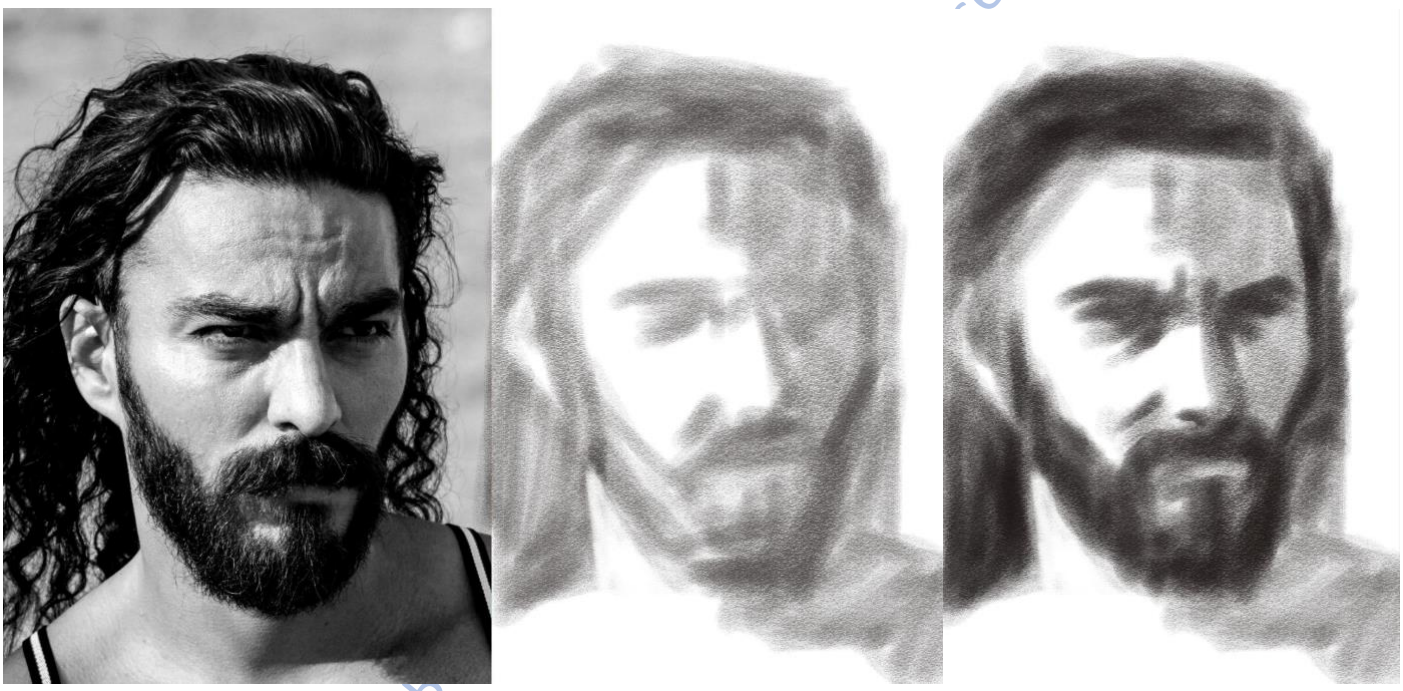
If an alien from another planet who had never seen a human heard a description of a human and tried to draw it, it might come out like this. Everything is there, but it's not 3 dimensional and it doesn't show any light or shadow.

On the right, the drawing *only* uses light and shadow. There are no hard lines around any of the parts of the face, but we can still see that it is a face. This is a *visual* face, meaning that it is more realistic and closer to how we actually see the world.

Tonal Drawing Exercise

To practice seeing the visual version of a face, we can start by trying to only draw the areas of light and shadow that we see. This is often called a *tonal drawing*. To make it even more challenging, you can try to do the drawing without using *any* lines. Below are three references. In the first one, we've created a tonal drawing in 2 stages, without using lines at all.

1. The first stage is putting down some tone (shading) for everything on the reference that is *not* very light or white. Notice that everything on the right-hand side of the drawing is at least a little bit in shadow.
2. The second stage adds more tone to the darkest areas, which makes the right-hand side of the face and forehead look lighter by comparison. You can see the features of the face and it looks 3D, but there are no lines drawn around eyes, nose or mouth. Everything is light and shadow.

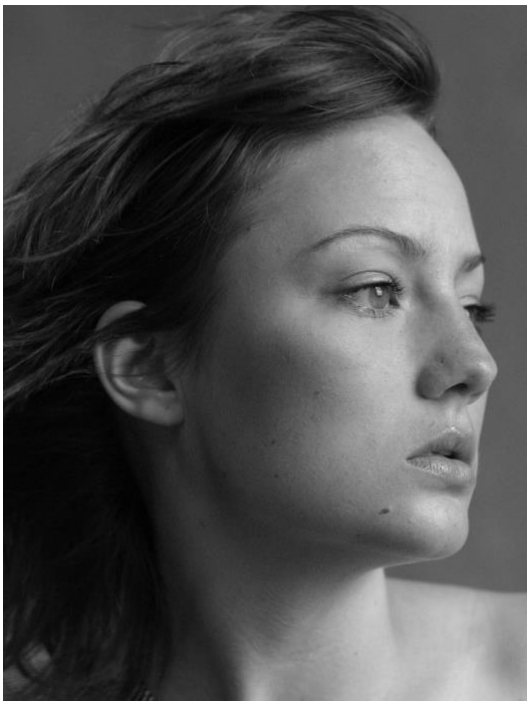


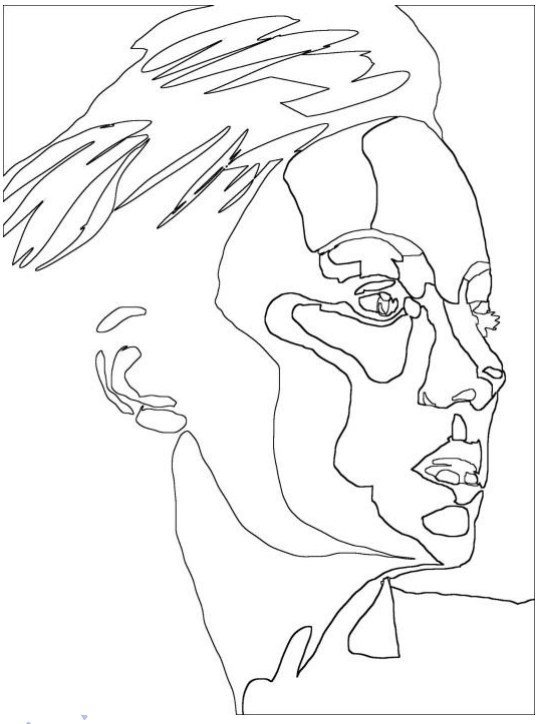
Drawing Tips:

- Keep the drawing small and try to be fast, so you don't think about details too much
- Use a softer pencil (like a 2B or 4B) or charcoal to quickly fill in the tonal areas in big blocks, including the background!
- If possible, try to keep shading the whole time without stopping so you're not tempted to start drawing lines

- If you are having a hard time seeing the tones (the light and dark areas), try squinting at the reference and then at your drawing so you see less definition. Spend just as much time looking at the reference as your drawing!

You can try it yourself with the two references below. One has the tonal shapes already marked out for you. Try to do the second one on your own.





Colour Mixing for Skin Tones

There are lots of different ways to create skin tones and you can use many different pigments or combinations of colours to get the right result. It is important to notice whether your subject has a light or dark complexion, and what underlying colours you might see when you look carefully into the light areas and shadow areas.

Most skin tones use a combination of all three primary colours (red, yellow and blue) and white. When you combine all three primary colours together, you get a range of colours known as *tertiary colours*. Brown is an example of a common tertiary colour. These colours are not as saturated (they are closer to grey) than pure primary or secondary colours, but usually people don't have skin that is purely red, yellow, blue or purple, orange or green anyway! We may have some *accents* of these, but most areas of the face or body are tertiary colours (unless someone is quite sick).

We can make tertiary colours a few different ways, but the most common ways are:

- Putting out red, yellow and blue pigments and mixing these in different amounts to get the kind of tertiary colour you want; or
- Putting out a pair of *complementary opposite* colours (red/green, purple/yellow, blue/orange) and mixing these to get the kind of tertiary you want.

Whichever way you do it, you are still doing the same thing - mixing all three primaries (since each secondary contains 2 primaries).

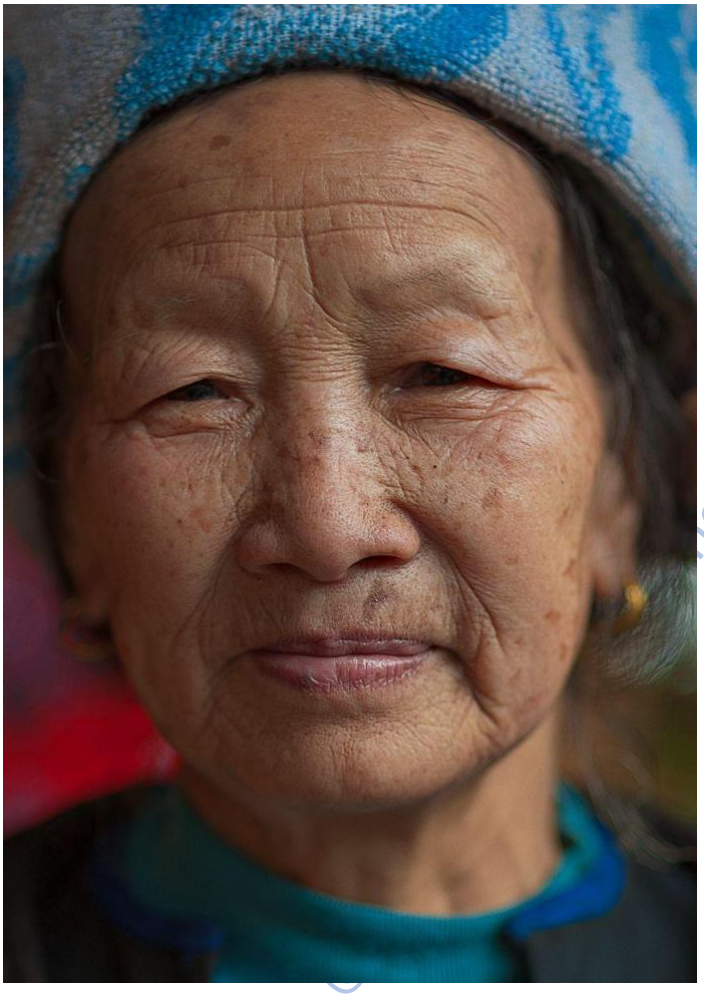
To see the range of what colours are possible, fill in the chart below with swatches of your mixes.

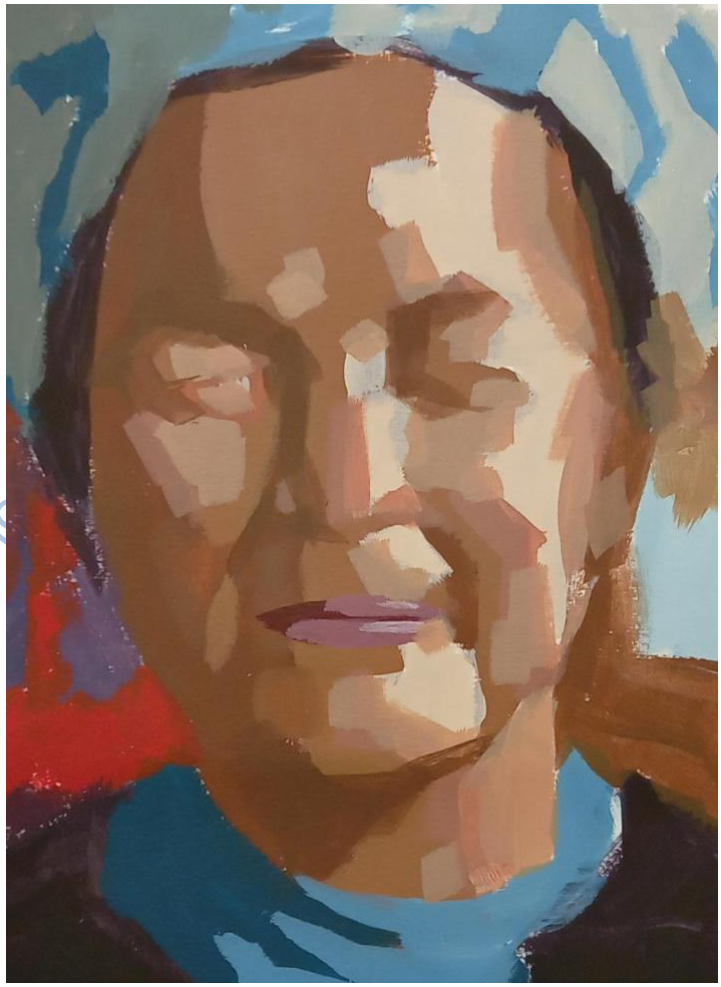
	More primary	Equal	More Secondary	+ White
Red + Green				
Blue + Orange				
Yellow + Purple				

Start Simple

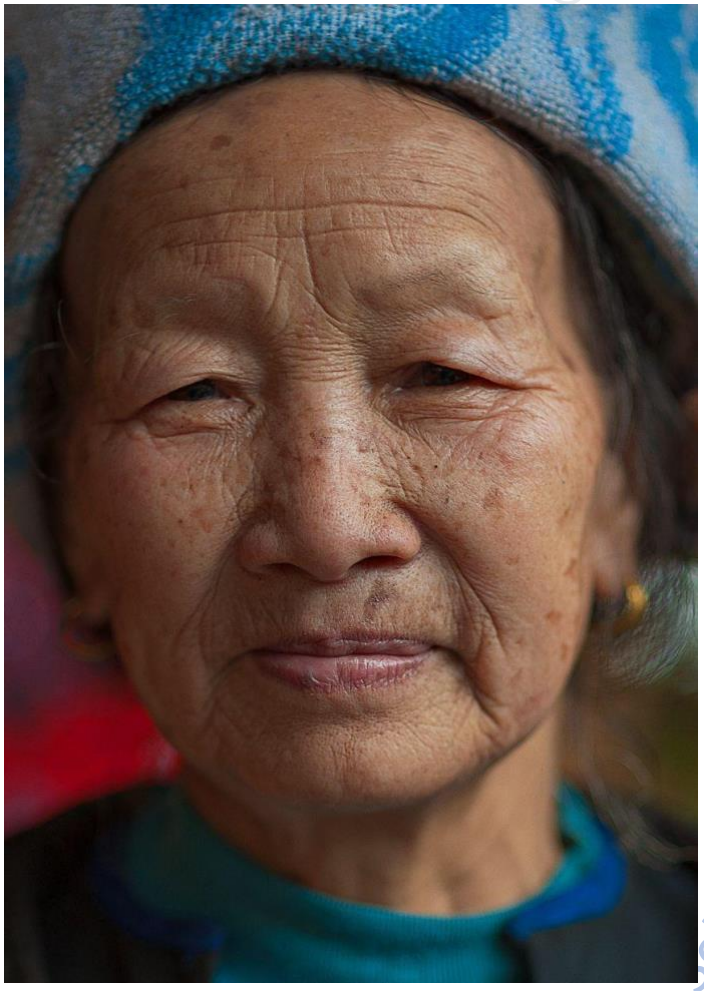
It's easy to get lost in all the colours on a face. Like with the tonal drawing exercise, you can start with a simplified version of all the colours in the face by limiting yourself to only a few different pools of colour. Once you have these basic pools blocked in, you can blend the shapes together more and add smaller variations in colour and details.

In this version of the portrait below, the first layer uses only 4 basic pools for the different areas of the face, aside from the lips. Can you see where the different pools are used?





In this second layer, the original pools have been blended together and smaller adjustments have been made to add more variation in the colours and more detail, but the basic structure and original pools are still there.

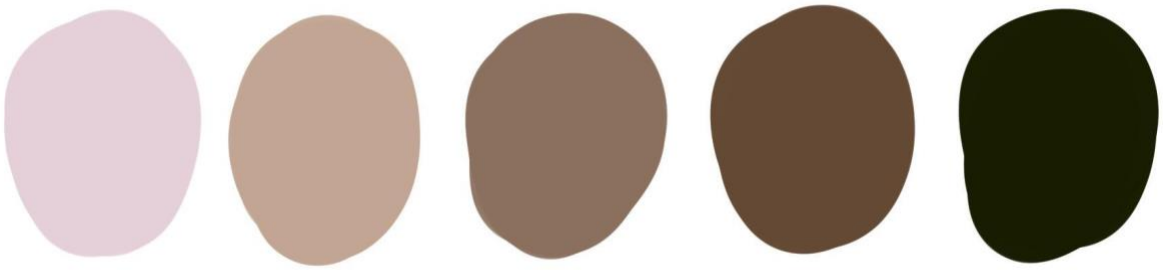


Try it out! First, try to paint every part of the portrait below (so there is no white canvas left) with only 5 pools of colour (see below). The goal in the first stage is not to make it look exactly like the finished portrait, it is to group the different areas of the portrait together and simplify it so you have a better base to work on top of and adjust.

Think of it like a mosaic or paint by numbers, except you have to decide what the shapes are before you fill them in with paint.

Mix your colours to match these ones below, and then use them to paint every part of the portrait, making it as broad and simple as possible.

Highlights Light midtone Med midtone Dark midtone Darkest tones



Colours to use
Highlights: mix white and a little bit of cool red
Light midtone: mix mostly white with orange and a little bit of blue
Medium midtone: as above, with less white
Dark midtone: same as the light midtone, but with less white
Darkest tones: use black

If you are having trouble mixing the colours, you can use burnt umber instead of orange and blue for the midtones.

Once you have *blocked in* the main colours of the portrait, you can try blending the edges of the areas together to make the transitions between colours smoother. You can also adjust the colours by adding touches of more primaries or secondaries based on what you can see.

Colour mixing tips:

- Mix small amounts of colour first until you have the right mix. Squeeze out a little of your red, yellow, blue and white separately, and only pick up small amounts with your brush or palette knife at a time. Don't squeeze lots out on top of each other and start mixing, you'll end up with a big mess!
- Text your colours out on your canvas, don't trust what they look like on your palette. You can always paint over or wipe off the paint if it's not right.
- If you find the size of the pool you are mixing is getting too large, take a small amount with your brush and put it to one side to make a new pool. It will make it easier to adjust the colour and you'll use a lot less paint.