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With bravura brushstrokes, **Thomas Torak** focuses on the painterly surface and gladly passes on old master techniques to his students.

Alive with paint

BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN

THOMAS TORAK CREATES extraordinary work, meticulously using time-tested methods handed down from the old masters, such as Rembrandt and Rubens. "These recipes and techniques are amazing tools. They allow me to produce paintings that express my ideas in a profoundly beautiful way and create works that I know will last for centuries," he says.

Choosing Materials Carefully

His materials are also time-tested. For decades he has created his own paints by grinding and mixing dry pigments with linseed oil. This assures him of quality paints with high concentrations of pigment to help him achieve rich, vibrant effects. Lately, because teaching regularly at the Art Students League of New York is making his personal painting time more precious, he's been using some commercially ground paints as well. "There are so many good paints out there now that grinding your own paints isn't as necessary as it was 30 years ago," says Torak.

He does, however, still make his own

LEFT: ***Peony Symphony*** (oil, 24x25) combines the chiaroscuro effect of strong, dark values against brilliant lights. Set off against a backdrop of green velvet, its movement captured in a bravura of brushwork, the white and pink flowers appear softly tactile and vividly alive.

All photos by George Bouret

Maroger medium by using a process that harks back to secret recipes of the old masters, rediscovered by Jacques Maroger in the early 20th century (see Materials, page ••). The process involves cooking the oil and lead together at a very high temperature so that the lead is incorporated into the oil. It produces highly toxic fumes, however, so he advises anyone making the medium to work in a place with good ventilation.

Fond of using musical analogies, Torak explains why he goes to such lengths: "A liquid medium is fine for painting just about everything, similar to the way a musician can play almost everything on the piano. When you use a gel medium like Maroger, however, it's as though you're playing an organ. There are more stops and pedals to play with—more ways to express your thoughts and feelings."

The artist paints only on linen canvas that he himself primes with rabbitskin glue and white lead. He believes that linen provides a better grab than cotton and lasts longer. Additionally, he says that the oil prime has a

BELOW: When creating large landscapes in his studio, Torak prefers not to work from photographs. He paints his landscapes *en plein air* and then develops some of them into larger, studio paintings using the studies, memory, and imagination. "In the studio, it's not as much about recollecting specific details as it is portraying the feeling and experience of the place," he says. "For ***A Morning Walk*** (oil, 30x32), I further developed the fullness of the trees and more completely expressed the atmosphere over a couple of weeks in the studio."

great density to it and that, when light strikes the canvas, "the light really bounces back with great authority." Accordingly, all of this concern and diligence toward the artist's materials is largely aimed at being able to create a durable, rich, and lively surface that people are going to be more interested in viewing.

A Value-Added Palette

That Torak is enthusiastic about materials is evident, but he's nothing short of exuberant when it comes to talking about his palette. "I always call my palette my piano and set it up so that all of my colors are organized from light to dark (see Torak's Class Palette, page ••), just as piano keys are arranged from higher to lower notes. This arrangement is important because everything in the painting is always moving from light to shade." According to Torak, the idea of a progression of color value on the palette is derived from 19th-century artists. As value control became increasingly important in their work, they needed to organize the palette," he explains.

At the Art Students League, Torak is part of a direct succession of artists inheriting this palette arrangement and its associated techniques and now aptly passes the torch of this knowledge on to his own students—knowledge he learned from his teacher, Frank Mason (1921–2009), whose class Torak took over after Mason's death. Mason, in turn, learned it from his friend and teacher at the League, Frank Vincent DuMond (1865–1951), who taught at the Art Students League for over 50 years. Mason had taken over DuMond's class after his death in 1951.

Directly beneath his colors on the palette, Torak places a black-to-white value scale with each gray value matching the value of the color above it. He mixes the gray scale using varying amounts of ivory black with white. "You can use the grays or not, but just having them there is a great reminder of each color's value," he says. "Sometimes it's difficult to see the value because the chromatic intensities of the colors can be very different. For example, yellow ochre's chromatic intensity is very low, yet its tonal value is in the middle of the palette.

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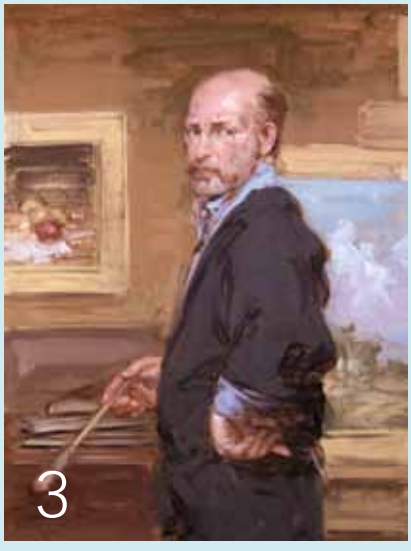
ABOVE: "In contrast to *A Morning Walk* (page ••), when I brought the study for ***Sunny Afternoon*** (oil, 9x12) home," says Torak, "I realized that I'd said everything I wanted to say about that scene in that size." In this piece, Torak treats light, space, and form as equally important. He exploits the tones at the light end of the palette and uses rapid brushwork to create dazzling sunlight and express the movement of the air.

A Painting That Looks Alive

BY THOMAS TORAK

Painting self-portraits has a long and continuing tradition, from Rembrandt to van Gogh to David Leffel. It's a wonderful way for artists to experiment with materials and techniques while creating fun characters. ***In the Studio*** (page ••; oil, 40x30) was painted directly on the canvas from life, using a mirror, without preliminary drawings or oil studies. It was completed in 4 days, with 4 to 6 hours of work each day.



1. First hour—Begin with sweeping rhythms: My vision is to have a painting that looks alive when it's finished; therefore, it must begin in a lively way. Rather than the traditional (plodding and laborious for me) blocking-in method, I prefer to use loose, sweeping rhythms to begin my painting. These rhythms moved up, down, and around this particular figure as I designed the composition. At this stage I'm focused only on the design of the painting; a finished drawing isn't necessary.

2. Day 1—Develop the form: After I'm satisfied with where my figure or particular elements are on the canvas, I can begin to develop the form. Because I'm creating the illusion of form in three dimensions, I choose to deny the existence of the picture plane and prefer to think of my canvas as an empty three-dimensional space. Instead of building my painting on the canvas, I can let it slowly emerge from that empty space.

3. Day 2—Develop the space, the whole: Before going too far with the subject, I take time to let the rest of the painting begin to emerge. In order for the head to appear three-dimensional in this piece, I have to establish the space around the head. The paintings and sketchpads behind the figure must live in the same space as the figure, so it's important that all the parts of this painting relate to one another. If I think of "the background" as less important or separate from the figure or subject, the harmony of the entire painting will suffer.

4. Day 3—Focus on intangibles and details: When all parts of the painting are well established, I can focus on the character, personality, and details. Instead of piling on more brushstrokes, I let my brush move over the forms of the head in much the same way as a sculptor models the forms on his clay figure with his thumb—sometimes gently, sometimes forcefully. I bring every part of the painting to whatever amount of finish is appropriate to express that part. No part of any painting, however, can be more important than the whole.

5. Finishing—Unify the whole with washes: Most artists finish their painting by adding final details. Because I want my painting to be energetic and alive, I use the last day's work to re-establish the breadth of the piece. Sometimes I proceed with a final detail, but more often I use large transparent washes.

No piece, no detail, no brushstroke is more important than the harmony and luminosity of the whole. My focus returns to where the painting began. The canvas is an empty space; the figure stands in that space and is illuminated by a single source of light.

Materials

Surface: linen canvas (Torak believes that linen has a better grab than cotton and lasts longer), usually **Utrecht** Type 74D, which Torak primes with rabbitskin glue and white lead; hardboard panels primed with gesso made with rabbitskin glue and whiting

Oil paints: Old Holland, **Blockx**, **Williamsburg**, **Vasar**i (also Torak's own hand-ground paints

Palette: white, cadmium lemon yellow, cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium orange, yellow ochre, cadmium red light, cadmium red medium, cadmium red deep, alizarin crimson, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, burnt umber, ivory black

Brushes: an assortment of bristles, mostly **Robert Simmons**

Liquid medium: Torak makes his standard medium with equal parts linseed oil, turpentine, and either damar or mastic varnish, sometimes varying the proportions or adding driers.

Gel medium: He makes his own Maroger medium by combining black oil, which is a mixture of lead oxide (litharge) and cold-pressed linseed oil, with mastic varnish.

ABOVE: Torak's class palette is set up so that all of the colors range from light to dark (light to shade). Directly beneath his colors on the palette is a black-to-white value scale with each gray value matching the value of the color above it.

ABOVE: The rhythms of the rounded forms in the trees, silo, and hay bales, along with Torak's fluid brushwork, contribute to the vitality and sense of movement in ***Round Bales*** (oil, 16x16). The hay bales appear as though they might even be tumbling down the hill!

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Tonal value can often be difficult to discern when working with low-intensity earth colors and more highly chromatic cadmiums on the same palette." Torak has his students mix middle values in the middle of the palette, light values on the light end, and darker values on the dark end. "We're never just looking for an empty space on the palette. Everything is controlled from light to dark," he explains.

Embracing All Genres

Torak is a believer that an artist should paint all subject matter—figures, portraits, landscapes, still lifes. "I think it's very important because painting one genre makes you more sensitive to another," he says. "When you paint a portrait, you want to capture the personality of the sitter. Then when you paint a landscape, you begin to express the 'personality' of an individual tree. Still life teaches you composition, which in turn helps when you're composing a landscape. I often think of the drapery in my still life as a river flowing through the painting. Again, for example," Torak continues, "if you want to make a tabletop appear to go back in space and you've already painted a field 300 yards deep, you understand how to do so immediately. Moving freely from genre to genre also keeps an artist from becoming stale, formulaic, and repetitive."

Everything In Motion

Torak cites the pearl of wisdom that Georgia

O'Keeffe (1887-1986) remembered from her studies at the Art Students League with William Merritt Chase (1849-1916): that, to interest him (Chase), the paintings had to be alive with paint. Accordingly, Torak sees even inanimate objects, space, and light as active and alive with motion, which is evinced in his flowing forms, dynamic compositions, and bravura brushstrokes. "Everything is always moving, breathing," says Torak, who believes that three core elements are to be carefully considered when you're painting. "The first is the subject matter, the second is the light, and the third is the space; and all three need to be painted with a vitality that expresses their character and movement."

But the obvious question is how do you paint what you can't see, such as the space between you and the model and even behind the model. "You can't see personality, character, or weight, and yet you strive to paint them," Torak remarks. "You must acknowledge that these intangible qualities are an important part of what you're painting. If you don't think about painting something, it won't magically appear in your painting. I'm not a big fan of 'happy accidents' in painting."

"Driving All the Horses"

Another pertinent "gem" Torak remembers from one of his teachers at the League, Robert Beverly Hale (1901-1985), is that "you can't draw something until you know it exists." Torak explains that Hale's book, *Drawing Lessons from the Great Masters* (Watson-Guptill Publications, first published 1964), is divided into sections on the topics of such things as anatomy, light and planes, and so forth. "The last chapter is called 'Driving All the Horses at Once,'" Torak says, "and that's the way we must paint—the brushwork needs to do more than one thing; it must drive all the horses at once. Every stroke is expressing different things simultaneously: form, light, motion, color, weight, character. It's like conducting a symphony. You're taking all these great parts and trying to pull them all together into a single sound, a single image."

Circles and Rhythms

To understand how this artist deftly combines diverse qualities into one expressive whole, we have only to look at his painting *Breakfast* (page ••). While Torak uses a broad range of value from dark to light, he saves the lightest values for the eggs and the gleam on the toaster. Aided by the bunched cloth lifting the basket and by the angle of the light upon the toaster, these two strongest light areas create opposing arcs. Here it's easy to see that Torak composes in circles and rhythms.

BELOW: If you have good materials and your drawing skills are secure, you can create a fabulous painting in a short time. Torak painted this powerful study, ***Man with a Cap*** (oil, 10x8), in just over an hour. In this self-portrait, the subject emerges from the background space, not too unlike the manner in which Michelangelo's unfinished, slave sculptures emerge from their rough, marble blocks.

Opaque vs Transparent

Another favorite technique of Torak's is to create contrasts of opaque paint in the lights with translucent and transparent tones in the shadows. In *Breakfast* (below), the light areas of the basket are painted opaquely, while the shadows on the underside and the cast shadow behind are transparent, thus drawing the viewer's eye to the light. The background is painted with varying amounts of opacity, sometimes letting some of the raw umber ground show through. Torak plays this subtlety against the stirringly painted, reflective surface of the toaster.

Contrasting Techniques

There is overall a luminous quality to *Breakfast* about which Torak notes, "The space is flooded with light, a characteristic of the school of Rubens (1577–1640), whereas *Cantaloupe with Grapes* (at right) is reminiscent of the work of Caravaggio (1571–1610) and Rembrandt (1606–1669), with its strong, chiaroscuro effect."

The fluidity of Torak's brushwork can be more readily observed in this latter still life, accomplished alla prima (at first attempt), whereas *Breakfast* was painted over four sittings. "Both the use of light and the manner of painting can be used to express what you want to say in your painting," explains Torak. "If *Breakfast* had been painted with more chiaroscuro it would be a completely different work. Likewise, if I'd used a slower painting technique for *Cantaloupes and Grapes*, it would say something else to the viewer. Some ideas can be fully expressed as artful songs; others need to be operatic."

Canvas as Empty Space

To further explain his process, Torak says, "I always begin in the middle. If I'm painting tonalities, I'll start with the middle and move to the darks and lights. When I'm painting

BELOW: Torak prefers to think of his still lifes, such as ***Breakfast*** (oil, 16x20), not as compositions of inanimate objects, but rather as group portraits. This enables him to express the individual characteristics and personalities of each of the objects. Notice the repetition of circle-shapes, which add to the dynamism and movement in this piece.

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ABOVE: The fluid, dynamic brushwork Torak uses, as evident in ***Cantaloupes and Grapes*** (oil, 16x18), is one of the keys to keeping a painting alive. "If you stop to nail down a part of the painting," says Torak, "you slow down the breath of the brushwork. When the brushwork stops breathing, the painting dies."

a form, rather than starting at the edges and working my way in, I start in the middle and work my way out and around the form. While many painters build forms upon the picture plane, I choose to deny its existence. I prefer to see the canvas as an empty space and to let the image emerge out of this empty space. I use space and rhythm instead of blocks and angles to design my paintings and I like to keep everything moving all the time." Fittingly, after one painting demonstration, a viewer told the artist that the way he moved the brush looked like a conductor before an orchestra. Indeed, Thomas Torak is a modern maestro. ■

ROBERT K. CARSTEN is an artist, instructor, and writer who studied at the Art Students League with Marshall Glasier and Robert Angeloch.

Meet Thomas Torak

Torak studied drawing and painting at the Art Students League of New York with Robert Beverly Hale and Frank Mason. In 2008 the League invited him to join the staff as an instructor of portraiture and figure painting. He has participated in more than 400 exhibitions and been awarded gold medals by the American Artists Professional League, Audubon Artists, and the Academic Artists Association, and a silver medal from Allied Artists of America. His paintings have been seen at the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), the Michele & Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts (Springfield, Massachusetts), the Huntsville Museum of Art (Alabama), the Bergstrom-Mahler Museum (Neenah, Wisconsin), the San Diego Art Institute, and the National Academy Museum (New York City). Torak's paintings can be found in the permanent collections of the Masur Museum of Art (Monroe, Louisiana) and the Art Students League of New York. An exhibition of Torak's new works opens on October 18, 2013, at Sloane Merrill Gallery (Boston). Visit his website: www.thomastorak.com.