

*Stephie with Blue Drape* (opposite; oil, 18x14) was painted in one session. "There were so many beautiful warm colors in her skin that I surrounded her with blue and green drapes," says Thompson.

# Life Studies

Veteran illustrator **George Thompson**, who took a risk when he embarked on a full-time painting career, talks about how he made the switch and why.

■ Interview by Maureen Bloomfield

**T**he former art director for the in-house advertising department of Bloomingdale's, George Thompson created illustrations for *Business Week*, *Scholastic* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, while moonlighting as a musician, actor and a founding member of an improvisational comedy group called Premises Premises, which performed at Manhattan's top comedy clubs. Deciding to pursue his dream of painting full time, he moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, seven years ago. He continues to produce illustrations for major publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*.

**When you lived in Manhattan, you organized life drawing classes for the Society of Illustrators. Can you tell me a little about that experience?**

It wasn't just life drawing! We did costumes, we did themes, we reenacted paintings; we found models that sort of looked like a Toulouse-Lautrec character and we'd do a cancan night. We'd also have jazz and sketch nights—a model with a jazz quartet playing.

It's actually grown until it's an entire night, with the bar open; it's gotten pretty wild.

I always liked the idea of having music tied to the life drawing classes, because Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec would go to clubs and the theatre, and their art seems as if it were done to music. In our current Bucks County group, we have five or six artists and we paint in front of people. We artists are a little more dramatic and bolder if we're painting in front of people. You can hire models for your own studio and just paint by yourself, but, when you're painting with a group, there's an energy that pushes everybody along.

**Do you think your fondness for painting in a group follows from your work as an actor? You were in the theater at one time and you had an improv comedy group.**

Yes. A lot of the comedy I did was more visual than verbal. In the improv group, I would do these physical cartoons and act them out with other people. My career in illustration came out of that. Acting was great preparation. We studied how to create a character and how to strip things down to communicate because improv actors have to say things quickly.

**How do you block in the portrait; how do you see the picture's structure?**

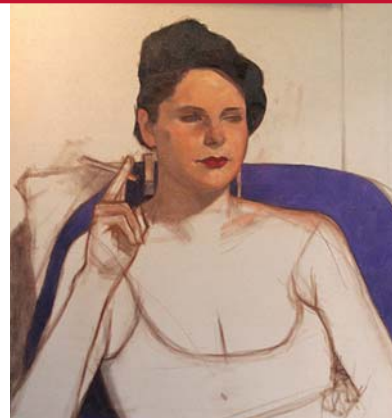
There are two ways I attack a painting: I'll either start linear—drawing what I see, breaking it down into line and then throwing masses of color on top of those lines—or I'll throw masses onto the paper and draw into those masses.

■ **Maureen Bloomfield** is editor of *The Artist's Magazine*.

## Harmonic color



"It's more about drawing than about mass and value," as Thompson strives to achieve a good likeness.



Using a warm palette (with the additions of titanium white and ivory black), he starts setting up the cool/warm contrasts.

Every painting is fundamentally a group of four or five different shapes. If you look at master paintings in black-and-white reproductions and turn them upside down, you'll see beautiful shapes. When I block in, I do a similar thing: I break the image down to shapes or groups of value. To do this I take each group of related values and represent them as one flat shape using a posterlike midvalue—no highlights or darks.

I block in these flat shapes of color before I start any detail, so I can move things around a lot more easily. If I didn't block in first, I could finish a whole eye and then realize the head is off. A block-in is the underlying scaffolding—an abstract design of flat, midvalue shapes—then the detail goes on top of that.

### Do you work with a full color palette at this stage?

I know a lot of artists like to separate the value, the color, the drawing—some people will do all the drawing and then just fill in the color; other people will do this sort of monochromatic painting, and then drop the color on top of it. I really think it's a question of juggling all three things at the same time. It's the value, it's the color and it's the drawing. If you're doing all three things at the same time, you're really cooking. The painting comes alive that way.

**Your color is bold with high contrast, but you don't work with conventional complements. Instead of red and green, for instance, you'll have primaries, like red and blue.**



*Packing up the Dresser* (ink and watercolor; *Inspired House* magazine) and *Cool Guy with Guitar* (ink and watercolor) are examples of Thompson's illustrations. "I want the pieces to feel light, not labored over. Sometimes the world is way too serious," says Thompson.





His basic palette consists of cadmium yellow light, cadmium red light, yellow ochre, burnt sienna and Venetian red.



In the halftones and shadow, he uses viridian and Prussian blue; he chooses alizarin crimson for some of the purples.



Because his chosen colors are fairly close to one another on the color wheel, the effect is harmonious.

I worked really hard on color. Maybe my weakness became my strength because I was forced to work on it more. I think the key for me is harmony, that all the colors work together. I try to work with a smaller palette of colors: a warm and a cool of each hue, but each of these colors leans toward one of the other colors on the color wheel. For instance, I'll have two yellows, one that leans toward the red and one that leans toward the blue: lemon yellow and cadmium yellow light. I'll also have a red that leans toward the yellow, like a cadmium red light, and then a cooler red that leans toward the blue, like alizarin crimson. I'll have a greener blue like phthalo blue and then an ultramarine blue, which leans toward purple.

I never have predestined or predetermined colors in mind; I always try to figure out what the particular subject is telling me. Just like flesh colors. The variety is so amazing, so beautiful. I really think it's a mistake to say, "This is my list of formulas for flesh colors." Each time the lighting is different, the person is different; the time of day is different: The atmosphere is always different.

**At a life drawing class or in your studio, how do you control the light so it's consistent?**

I go through different periods where I try to get different light bulbs and different colors. I built this contraption that has two strong lights, a halogen and a fluorescent, and I tried different light bulbs in that. I also have a big window with northern light in my studio, and I'll use a combination of natural and artificial light. It's a struggle because I'll do a painting in a certain light and then bring it to the gallery and say, What was I thinking?

I read somewhere that some famous artist, maybe it was Turner, wouldn't finish his paintings; he would go to the gallery and hang the painting and finish it on the wall—just to get the colors correct so it would look right in the place it was going to be shown.

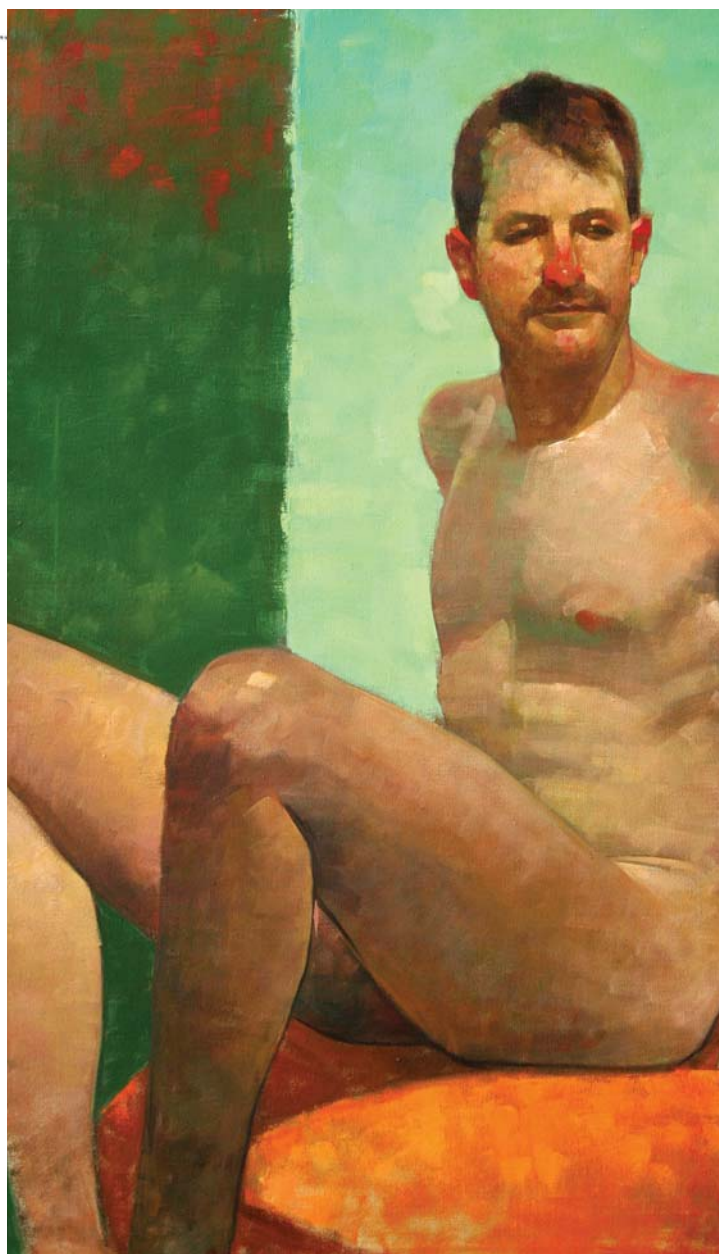


Thompson's style is to present portraits that seem fresh and spontaneous; hence, he quits before he has a chance to overwork the surface and ruin the effect. See *Hannah* (above; oil, 22x20).



George Thompson tells how moving from the city to the country changed his palette and describes how he uses black walnuts harvested from his backyard. Visit [www.artismagazine.com/thompson](http://www.artismagazine.com/thompson).

Thompson painted *Stephie with Green Scarf* (below; oil, 24x18) as a demonstration. For *David* (at right; oil, 32x25) he used a Degas color scheme: red-orange; blue-green.



## Meet George Thompson

"I remember in college (Pratt Institute) the fine artists would sit on one side of the cafeteria and the illustrators would be on the other side. Little did they know that they could all learn from each other," says George Thompson, who recently showed more than 30 paintings at the New Jersey State Museum at Ellarslie Mansion. He's now the director of drawing services at Mixed Media in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and continues to run weekly life drawing and painting sessions. He is represented by Sabine Rose Gallery in Doylestown ([www.sabinerosegallery.com](http://www.sabinerosegallery.com)). To learn more about his life and work, visit his website at [www.georgethompsongallery.com](http://www.georgethompsongallery.com).





**When you paint in oil, what medium do you use?**

Stand oil and Gamsol by Gambolin. I'll use distilled turpentine if I paint outside, but Gamsol if I'm inside. It's great and has fewer fumes. But I always use stand oil; I think that's the perfect medium.

**Do you just have basic brushes; do you ever use a palette knife?**

I use a palette knife, mostly for landscapes, and I'll use the entire array of brushes: filberts, sable, etc. I usually start off with flat bristle brushes to do the block-in, so it's nice and bold. I'll use the biggest brush I can. And then as the painting goes on, I'll try to use more sable brushes for more detail so the paint doesn't get upset. I use Robert Simmons Signet brushes and SilverBrush brushes: flats, filberts and rounds. I use a wooden palette that gets better with age. I paint on canvases of different textures like Fredrix Scarlet O'Hara, Kent and #70 Primed Cotton. I also use Clausen's linen canvas for portrait work. I stretch all my own canvas and try to stay with stan-

dard sizes. I like a variety of oil paints from Winsor & Newton, Old Holland and Utrecht.

**I imagine you grew up looking at book illustrations, like N.C. Wyeth's and Rockwell Kent's?**

I probably grew up looking more at illustrations in *Redbook* and *Ladies' Home Journal* and looking at illustrators like Mark English, Al Parker, Austin Briggs—the illustrators from the '60s and late '50s. I remember being so excited about how they changed illustration. I also looked at the covers of *TV Guide* and paperback books, as well as at movie posters. I did see N.C. Wyeth, Arthur Rackham, Maxfield Parrish and all those guys later, but I grew up looking at Frank Frazetta and terrific comic book artists. They all affected the way I see. You take in things from everywhere and sort of put them all together.

**Can you describe your career as an illustrator?**

I started off doing realistic illustrations; my career didn't take off until I started doing the humorous illustrations that came out of the theater. It's when I threw away all the research and just did it totally out of my head that it really came alive. I started getting interested in a lot of the graphic artists like Toulouse-Lautrec and Leonard Baskin, as well as in Japanese prints—I looked less at cartoons when I was doing my humorous illustrations and more at graphic artists, pen and ink artists: Charles Gibson, Ben Shahn and some of the great humorous illustrators, such as Ronald Searle.

Working in illustration helped me develop discipline and the sense of design, but it's a totally different place. If you see my illustration and see my paintings, they almost look as if two different people created them. The field of illustration has changed so much. I have so many friends who were successful illustrators who are making a transition to fine art.

**Is it economic? Is it that there isn't as much work?**

Art directors are using fewer illustrations. There was a group of illustrators who lived around New York City; the only way to get the sketches and the finished art to the publication was to deliver them by hand. Now with the Internet, there's a bigger pool. You can live anywhere: You just e-mail in. It used to be that, with stock illustration, all you could get was black-and-white clip art. Now you can go on a website and get anything for two or three dollars—and at good quality. It's very hard to make a living in illustration today.

I went from doing about 80 jobs a year to nothing for the first six months after 9/11. The business has never really come back—which isn't bad. My entire life while I was doing illustrations, I wished I had more time to devote to my fine art.

When I was in school, everyone—teachers and students alike—looked down on illustration. Years from now when they look at Norman Rockwell or Dean Cornwall, they'll realize that these are some of our greatest artists. America has a history of artists who started out as illustrators: John Sloan, Winslow Homer, Frederic Remington, Andy Warhol—it's just a way of making money with your art. 