

# Painting Realistic Hair

By **Becky Syroka** (all rights reserved)

People often ask me...."How do you paint hair? What brushes do you use?" I've previously written about what type brushes I use and my basic steps for texturing hair. This lesson will focus on the importance of careful observation of your study photo.....looking for those little tiny details which can transform your painting from "good" to WOW!

I've decided to use as my example, my portrait of my daughter Becky Laura playing in the sand on the beach at Presque Isle Peninsula (photo from 1979). Of all the portraits I've painted this one best demonstrates the aspects I want to teach in this lesson.

First of all, here is a close up of the head of the study photo:



## **#1 Silhouette**

Carefully observe the outer shape of her head...her silhouette. Although her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, the hair is rather loose and "puffs" out softly. From the division of her bangs/hairline notice the upward rise and then notice how the hair takes a rather straight slope downward into the tied ribbon. You can see that the weight of the ponytail has caused a downward "pull" and also observe the loose outward "puff" from the bottom of her tied ribbon to the nape of her neck.

## **#2 Highlights and Shadows**

I cannot overemphasize the importance of observing and recreating in your portrait the flow of light and shadow over the head and hair. Most of us take careful note of the brightest highlight area of the head when painting our portraits. But sometimes the other more subtle areas are overlooked. It is only by means of the light and shadows that you can create the look of a rounded contour to the side of her head

(above her ear). In this particular photo, notice that the sun appears to be coming from approximately the 11 o'clock position...creating the brightest highlight atop her head with gentle darker shadows as her hair slopes into her ponytail. The highlight also follows the contour of her head on the side, and recedes into shadow as the head curves inward down towards the ear. The lower portion of her hair from the ear back and up into the tied ribbon becomes progressively darker as it is cast into the deepest shadow.

**Train your eyes to detect the subtle.....**notice the way the sun hits brightly at the very top of her ponytail braid? Most of the braid is in shadow, yet notice the small reflected highlights in along the edges of her braid sections. Also notice how there are a few brightest highlight strands throughout her head, scattered in amongst with the mostly shadowed darker areas.

Her bangs are kissed with bright sunlight among the top most strands of hair, contrasting with darker color of the under hairs of her bangs. Sections of her forehead skin is visible and in deep shadow.

### **#3 Stray Wisps of Hair**

The very light stray hairs falling across her face are the most noticeable. However, observe also the loose hairs from the nape of her neck.....strands protruding from her braided ponytail (some darker strands protruding from the underside of the ponytail and many scattered sunkissed strands blowing in the breeze especially in areas above her bangs and at the top of her ponytail.

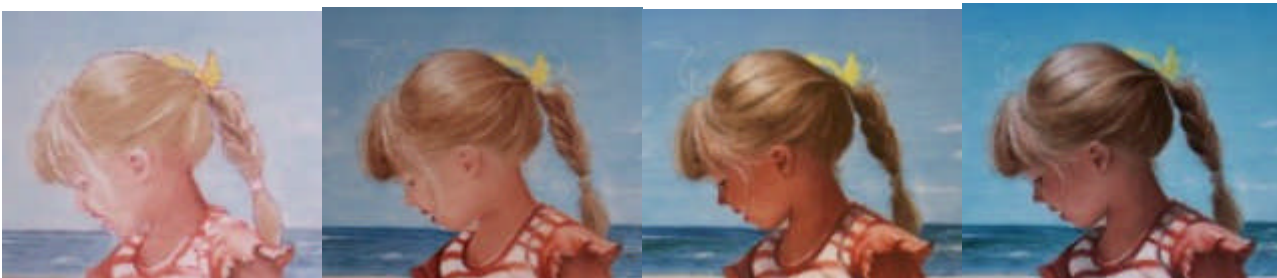
Please notice also how some strands of hair seem to twist as they curve around the sides of her head and form an interesting dimensional look as the strands are swept into the tied ribbon of the ponytail. Those looser highlighted strands are accented effectively by the darker underhair next to them.

### **#4 Soft Transition from Skin Into Hairline**

Hairlines are areas of soft transition....never a straight sharp line. Usually some skin is visible among the hairs at the very base and tiny new hair growth and wisps display a fuzzy and shadowed appearance.

### **Overview of the Process**

Here is a progressive look at the 4 paintings and firings leading to the completion of my portrait. I thought it would be helpful to look at them together first. I'll be showing each stage in a close-up below accompanied with my teaching notes for each stage.



**First Painting:**



Here are my objectives during my first painting:

1. Establish an accurate outer silhouette.
2. Wash skin color softly into the hair line of the neck and up into the forehead area.
3. Choose the lightest color within the hair as my base color (in this case I used Transparency). Applied the paint with a square shader (always in the direction of hair growth).
4. I use my hair texture brush to lightly brush over the applied paint to create very soft texture. This is just laying a good foundation for more texturing to come in later painting. Pretend that you are brushing her hair on her head...curving your strokes around the contours of her head and pulling the hair up to where you will bind it with a rubber band.
5. With a solvent cleaned brush, wipe out the area of the brightest highlight atop her head and gradually follow the highlight down the side of her head. Next, I oil my hair texture brush and lightly pull from the highlight area into the hair on both side (always from bare china into paint) to blend the highlight.
6. With a solvent cleaned brush (10/0 liner) pull some brightest highlight strands through the paint (bangs, braid edges, throughout her hair as in photo). Also, wipe out the strands which will fall over her face. Wipe right back to the white of the china. (wipe out plenty of them....you can always paint overtop of

too many highlights and you can slim your highlights by applying paint later on....but you can never get those bright white highlights back once painted....so don't skimp!)

7. I use a long haired scroller brush (fanned out the hairs are jagged) to lightly blend the nape of the neck skin and the paint of the hair. Keep it fuzzy and very very soft.

8. Once the sky is painted around the head, be sure to wipe out some wispy strands of hair (solvent wipe right back to the white) blowing in the wind. (You'll paint I the darker fly away hairs later on...

**\*\*Just a clarification\*\***

When I want a clean wipe out down to the white of the china I clean my brush after every swipe into Marci's Orange Brush Cleaner. Then you must blot the excess onto a towel in order not to disperse the paint with excess liquid.

When I want to blend my texture strokes, I dip my clean brush in my painting medium and blot out the excess. I then use the lightly oiled brush to blend texture through the paint or blend the paint with the white china.

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## **2nd Painting:**



With regard specifically to the hair....the emphasis for this 2nd painting was applying color (used a golden hair brown for the primary color and added bits of rich brown/and/or dark brown for some darker shading).

Once again, I will "brush" her hair lightly with my texture brush and once again, I will meticulously wipe out strands of brightest highlights and also wipe back some strands to the color painted on last time (transparency). We're building on our depth of color each time we paint the hair again. After painting the blue of the sky, it was necessary to wipe out those stray wisps from the blue sky area.

The light strands on her face were washed over with skin color this time, but then wiped clean again with the solvent cleaned brush.

Started painting in some strategic dark areas (for instance...the under bangs, the points of junction within the braid, the top of the pony tail area, etc.

Once again, making sure to keep the hairline transition soft!

### **3rd Painting:**



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This painting was when the general painting on the hair was completed. Common sense as well as referring to the study photo told me that the area below her pony tail would be an area of deep shade. Also, the side of the braid against her would be dark (but careful to retain those reflected lights in each

area). The sunlight hits brightly on the top of her head and then extends (bounces) over to the top of her ponytail and some beautiful reflected light on the outer side of the braid creates dimension and interest. This is the painting where I will apply some dark color close to the brightest lightest strands (dark against light) At this point, her hair should have lots of dimensions of colors....white strands....transparency strands....golden hair brown strands....rich brown and dark brown. There are light wisps continuing to be wiped out of the blue sky paint and dark wisps being painted into the blue sky area. As the skin color on her face becomes darker, the white wipe outs become more dramatic and I also apply strategic skin color with my tiny liner brush between strands of hair on her bangs (to have skin showing through her hair)

The painting and texturing of her hair is now completed.

So why does the finished painting look different? You'll see 😊

#### **4th and Final Painting:**



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To be absolutely honest, I must confess that the end result on her face and hair was a "happy accident". I wanted the sky to be a very deep vibrant blue color and decided to wash another coat of blue over the sky somewhat darker and brighter at the top of the sky and a bit lighter in the lower sky). I used a large

brush and simply washed blue straight overtop of her entire face and hair (didn't want to interrupt my brush strokes across the sky)with the intent of wiping the face and hair clean after I finished with the sky.

But, when I looked at my portrait....I LOVED the effect of the slight blue cast. You see, Becky Laura's hair was always slightly ash blonde...not really golden. So, the addition of the blue created a color more true to my daughter's actual color.

Additionally, her face in the photo is entirely in shadow (with only a reflected light blushing upward from her chin onto her lower face) The slightly grayed skin tone (created by the addition of the blue wash) contrasted logically with the more reddish color of her exposed suntanned skin color of her arms and legs. Another benefit to the light wash of blue was that I feel it "planted" her more naturally into her background....giving a sense of unity to the painting. At least that's MY opinion....how I see it 😊

Here's a photo of the completed portrait in its entirety so you can judge:



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Here's the original photo for comparison:



I hope this lesson will be helpful to you all as you embark on your own portrait projects.

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