

Portraiture Painting Activity/ All Ages- Inspired by James Chapin's Ruby Green Singing



James Chapin, Ruby Green Singing, 1928

Oil on Canvas, 38 x 30 in. Bequest of R.H. Norton

The name of the artwork is *Ruby Green Singing* by the artist James Chapin. This painting is part of the Norton Museum's American Art collection. James Chapin created this portrait from observation. Ruby Green was a singer from The Hall Johnson's Negro Chorus in Manhattan, New York City. This was a group devoted to singing spiritual songs. Green often performed for popular radio and television shows, as well as live concerts and plays.

In the painting, the simple background may indicate that the singer posed for the artist in his studio. Her uplifted head, eyes, and parted lips, suggests her own spirituality and devotion to her music. Chapin's attention to detail, deep shadows, and strong highlights create a stage-like setting. Light plays an important, almost spiritual role in this painting. Ruby Green's hand placement possibly refers to her classical vocal training; as singers used to be trained to hold their hands in positions like this. Chapin, a white artist, was interested in celebrating this young African American singer at a time when most images of African Americans – certainly entertainers – were stereotypes. He may have been suggesting her classical training in these elements of her pose to break those stereotypes. The portrait, *Ruby Green Singing*, captures her looking natural, beautiful, expressing herself through music and performance --- creating an iconic image.

Materials in your kit.

- Pencil
- Watercolor Paper
- Acrylic Paint
- Palette Paper

Instructions:

Throughout history, artists have represented people in portraits, documenting historical figures as well as everyday people. Portraits prompt us to ask questions about who these people are and why they have had their image captured for others to see and contemplate.

The woman in this painting is named Ruby Green, a singer. How is she represented in the painting? From your observations, what music can you imagine Ruby singing? Notice the warm lighting and tone of the piece. Take a look at her facial expression. What do you think her feelings are as she sings?

- 1- For this project, think about important people in your life that you would like to paint. It may be a family member or your best friend.
- 2- You may choose to use an existing photo of the person or draw from observation. If you use a photo, print it out on a piece of paper. Your photo must have great highlights and shadows, and your person must be placed in front of a plain background.
- 3- If you are drawing from observation, make sure your person is standing near a light source or a window, so there are some shadow areas on the face, which will add dimensionality to your painting. Find a plain wall or a backdrop, which will be used for your painting's background.
- 4- Once you have chosen your photograph or positioned your person to a light source and plain background, you may begin to draw. In your sketch, make sure to mark where the shadows and highlights are. Think in shapes and not lines, and block in the basic shapes where the shadows and highlights will go.
- 5- After you completed your drawing, choose and lay out only the colors you need for your painting. Think about what color you will use for your person's skin tone, clothing and background. Mix all the colors using the palette paper in your kit.
- 6- Start your painting by filling in the whites of the eyes first. Please note it is very important to realize that they are never pure white, there are always shadows and variation in the white part of the eye. Mix a little blue with white to create shadow.
- 7- Once you are done with the whites of the eyes, fill in the pupils. Highlights will be added at the end, and you can always layer paint over the top of paint to create them.
- 8- Move on to the face and figure. Notice the dark shapes you have created while drawing. Fill them in choosing dark colors. Blocking in the darks first will help you get a feel for the shapes especially in the face. As you fill in various details, remember to keep painting the shapes of the face, not the lines.

- 9- Continue to mix your colors. If you are using a photograph as your guide, dab a little bit of paint onto your photo to make sure the colors are close. Skin tones will vary and they are never the same all over the face, so keep mixing and dabbing as you paint.
- 10- After you finish painting your portrait, it is time to create a background. In most portraits such as *Ruby Green Singing* the backgrounds are very simple. Try to choose a color that does not compete with your figure and add it around the portrait. Always start your background from light to dark. In case you see shadows in your background, you may choose a second color to create contrast.