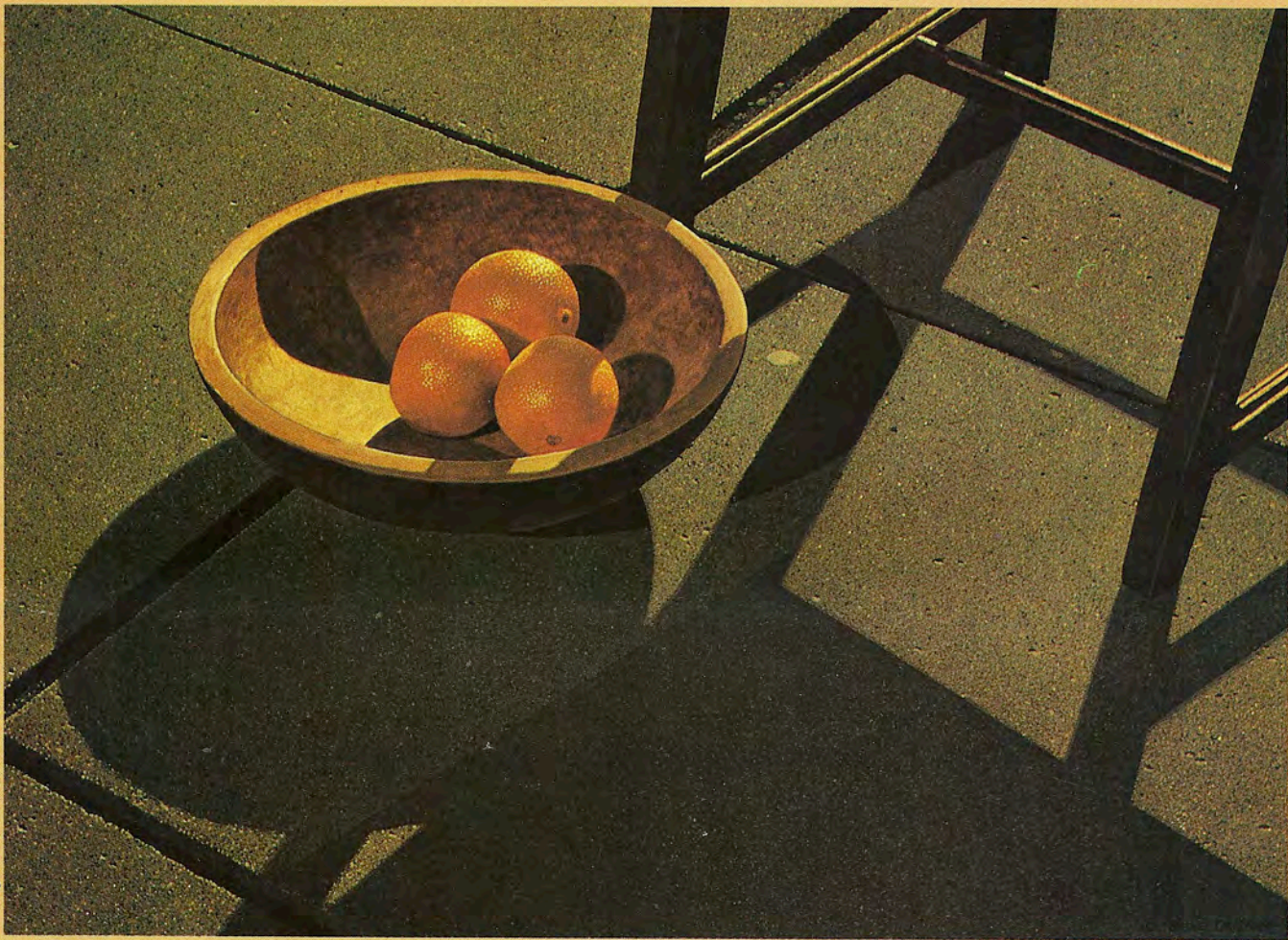


# The Artists

MARCH 1984  
\$2.00

M A G A Z I N E

ARTICLE ON GRACE COLE  
page 52



Oranges in the Afternoon, by Steve De Santo

## PHOTOREALISM: TECHNIQUES FOR BRINGING YOUR PAINTINGS TO LIFE

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# Portrait of a Portrait Artist

*Grace Cole is slow but sure in her pursuit of the real and the ideal.*

BY FRITZ HENNING



Photo by Ridge Studio

## *Painter of Portraits*

*A graduate of Prairie State College, Grace Cole received her art training through private instructors, studio apprenticeships, and at the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to extensive reading on the arts, she continues to supplement her training with courses in art, art history, music and philosophy. The artist lives in Glenwood, Illinois.*

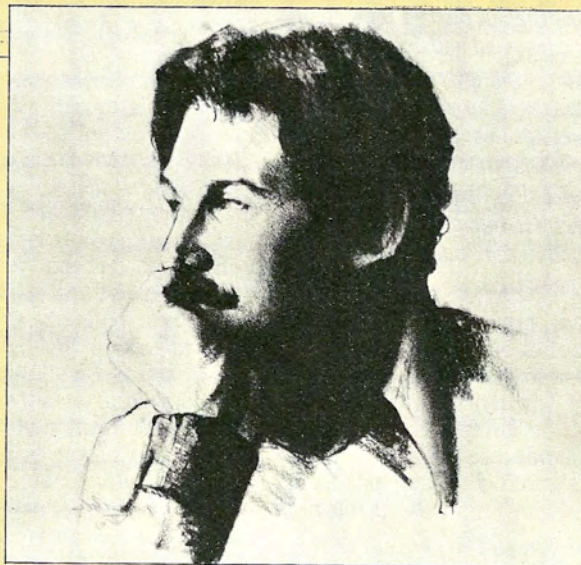
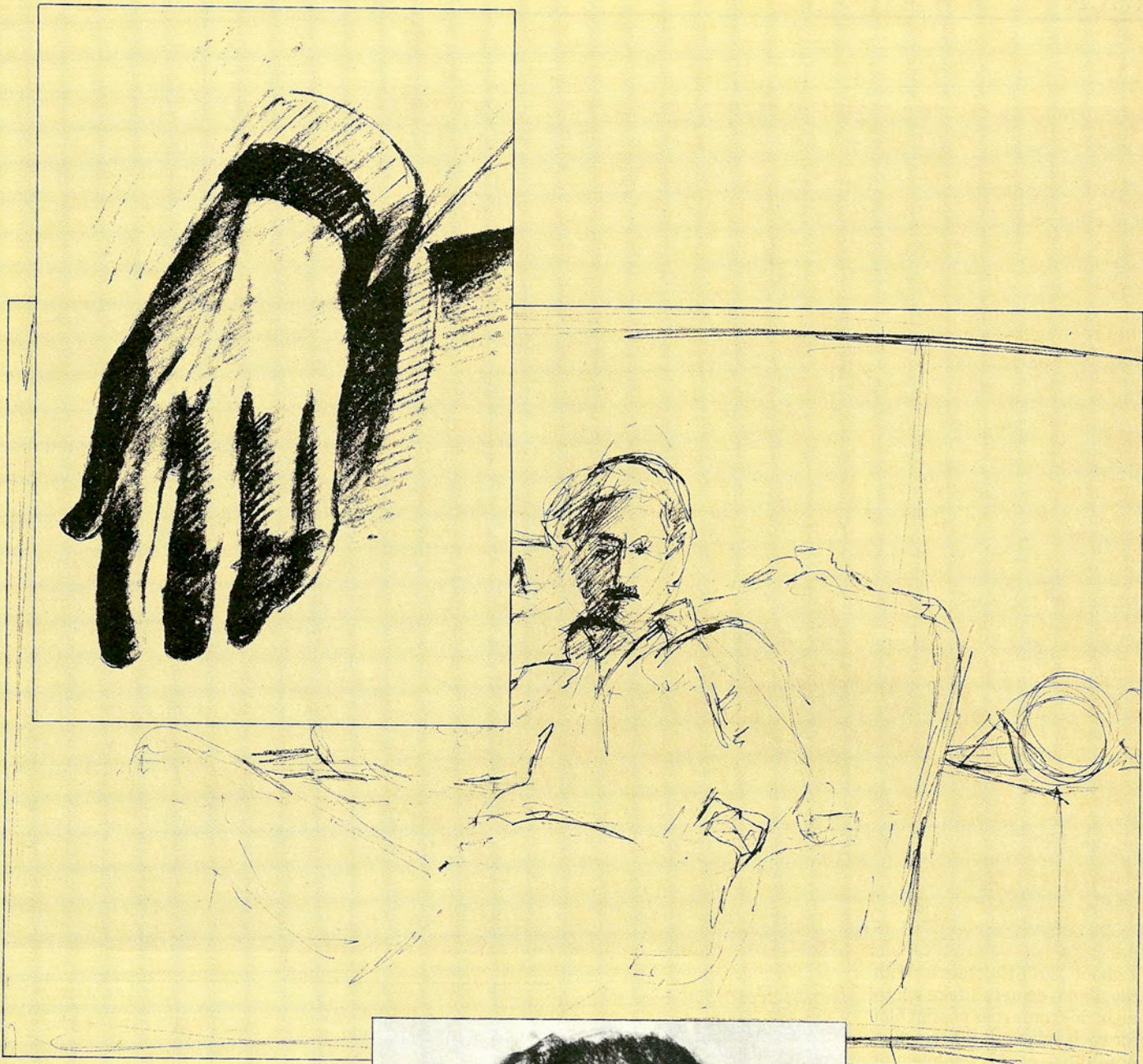
**Q**uick, easy and spontaneous are not the kinds of adjectives that come to mind when talking with Illinois portrait painter Grace Cole. An *alla prima* painting devotee she is not. All of her major portraits evolve through a *modus vivendi* requiring the kind of toilsome discipline we expect of astronauts or Olympic hopefuls. Dedication and singleness of purpose are the fitting words for this artist.

It often takes the artist up to four months to complete a portrait. During this time she seldom works on any other paintings. Her methodical day-to-day slowness through every stage might seem agonizing to others, but Cole apparently has no difficulty sustaining enthusiasm and interest through every purposeful step.

Yet, with all the painstaking care, her paintings do not appear overworked. Tight and precise they are, but they escape that boilerplate look common to so many labored paintings. Instead, her portraits have a kind of frozen-in-time quality suggesting the subjects' meditative attitudes as well as their realistic representations.

## **PORTRAIT OF BRIAN**

Obviously, the time required in completing any work of art has no bearing on its ultimate worth. Some masterpieces have been produced in a few hours, others have taken years to finish. Time is a meaningful factor only for the artist; and for most practitioners it is an irrelevant consideration. Working procedures, however, are a point of general interest, and particularly pertinent to anyone struggling along a parallel course. On this basis, let's retrace the typical step-by-step strategy Grace Cole followed



### *In Search of Brian*

*Three preliminary sketches of a subject help to solve some of the portrait's problems. Photos did not supply sufficient information on the figure's hand; thus, detailed sketch, top. Positions of the figure and furniture were determined in sketch above. Left, a charcoal head study (8x10) done to understand the model's attitude and mannerisms.*

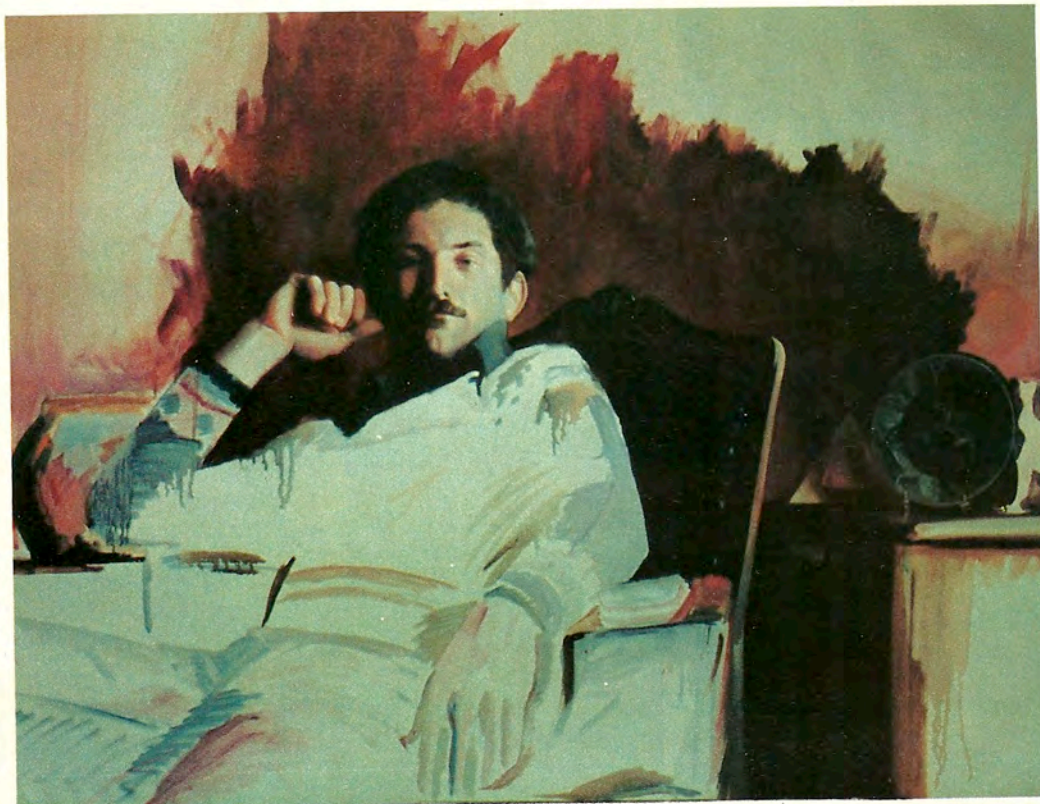
in creating the portrait she calls *Brian*, several phases of which are shown on following pages.

The initial stages were devoted to a series of rough pencil sketches done directly from the model. "I like to get acquainted with the environment and attitudes of my subjects . . . it's important to know what they think and feel," Cole observes. The drawings she does in these sittings are a deliberate but unobtrusive search for characteristic mannerisms, poses and attitudes that are as much a part of the subject's personality as the details of his features, or the type of clothes he wears. Whether or not satisfied with the results of preliminary sketches, the artist always gains in these drawing sessions insights that prove to be valuable.

## PHOTO TACTICS

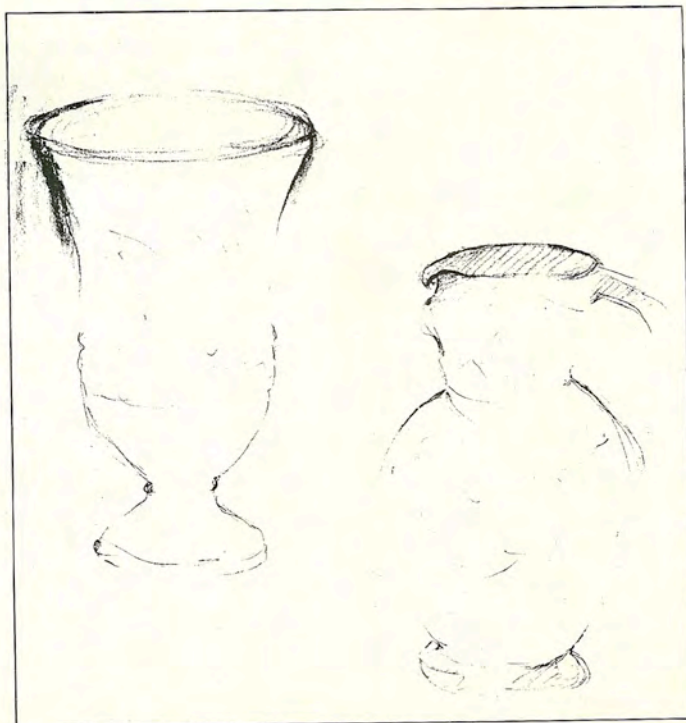
The next order of business is taking photographs. "I'm no photographer," she says, "but I shoot lots of pictures. With my 35mm camera I take six to eight 36-frame rolls of print film for each subject." When asked how she uses this mountain of film, Cole explains: "I work from 3x5-inch prints . . . by spreading them out, usually on the floor, I carefully select pictures that suggest silent clues I feel will help me in finding the best way to portray the individual.

"Photos can be studied in detail and fleeting expressions or gestures can be analyzed in a way not possible in direct observation. Also, things about the setting and environment of the subject's home or office reveal themselves in a manner that you often overlook when on the scene in person." The photographs also support her personal reaction to the subject, in addition to supplying the factual information she needs.



## *Brian Resolved*

*Sketches of objects from client's Wedgewood collection, right, were used to get a "feel" for shapes to be added to background. Above, painting is begun with thin turpentine washes related to final color the artist has determined for each area. Then a dark background value is applied.*





*Brian Realized*

*The portrait Brian (28x38) was completed using photographs for most of the final rendering.*

If all has gone well, the artist now has a firm concept of the portrait with a concrete idea of the pose and the picture's compositional structure. If not, she retreats to step one, and goes back for another session with the client to sketch or photograph again as required until she has what she needs. For example, because the information may not be sufficiently clear in the small-scale photos, a detailed study of, say, the hand in the proper pose might be necessary. Earlier steps that do not completely fulfill their function may be repeated at any stage of the painting's development.

*Brian* is painted on a 38x28-inch canvas in oil. Based on her small preliminary pencil sketches, Cole began the picture roughing-in the general position of the figure and major forms of the composition. This

was done directly in pencil on the canvas. Then she began painting with light, thin washes in a color generally appropriate to the area in which she was working. This is actually a continuation of the drawing process, only a brush is substituted for a pencil. Once the lay-in was fairly well established, she felt the need to state the basic values.

The next step was to brush in a background tone consistent with the hue and value she envisioned for that area in the final painting. By eliminating the white of the canvas in crucial areas, she was better able to paint in the relating values.

**IDEAL AND REALITY**

From this stage on it is a matter of constant painting, adjusting, refining. The picture is always worked on as a total entity.

*Cole Gallery*

*The drama of the portrait artist is typified by Portrait of Mr. Frank Schnabel (24x36), seen in progress and in finished oil; and by An Artist's Still Life (36x48), opposite—an oil that tells how beats the heart of the artist.*



Each area must relate to and support the whole. In other words, you can't carry one element such as the head to completion and then move to other areas. How successfully the artist accomplished her task can be judged by the reproduction of the completed picture shown as the final step in the demonstration here.

Grace Cole likes what she does and she is successful at it. Her portrait commissions are handled through an agent, Portraits/Chicago, in Lake Forest, Illinois. Her major works are now priced in the \$4,000 range.

Like most artists, Cole classifies herself as a perpetual student. She also teaches at a local art center, where she extols the value and challenge of painting the nude figure.

Recently, she has been working on a series of still life paintings combining geometric shapes with realistic natural forms. "These paintings," she says, "provide me with an escape into pure creativity."

Perhaps so, but it is evident in these efforts that she has no desire to escape her rigorous work regimen, all of which seems consistent with her philosophy. "The goal of art," she says, "is to bring the ideal to reality. To be as fully developed as an artist must be takes constant study and a love of life. Every day we bring to our canvas the total of who and what we are. A stale artist will produce dull, unimaginative work. If you seek to elevate the standard of what you produce, you must first elevate and educate yourself." ■

*Fritz Henning, senior editor of North Light Books, is an illustrator, designer, painter, teacher and writer on the ways of art and artists.*

