

How I Paint Children: 7 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



How I Paint Children

5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

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Table of Contents

Colleen	3
Elijah	15
Simon	22
Theo	32
Vaughn	43
Bonus: Using Grid Method	53



Colleen

Portrait of a
Little Girl with
a Pumpkin

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



First of all, let me say that I was immediately inspired to paint this portrait when I saw the reference photo. I loved the backlit figure against the pumpkin patch background, the abundance of rich colors and, of course, the priceless expression on the little girl's face. I knew it was going to be a good painting right away.

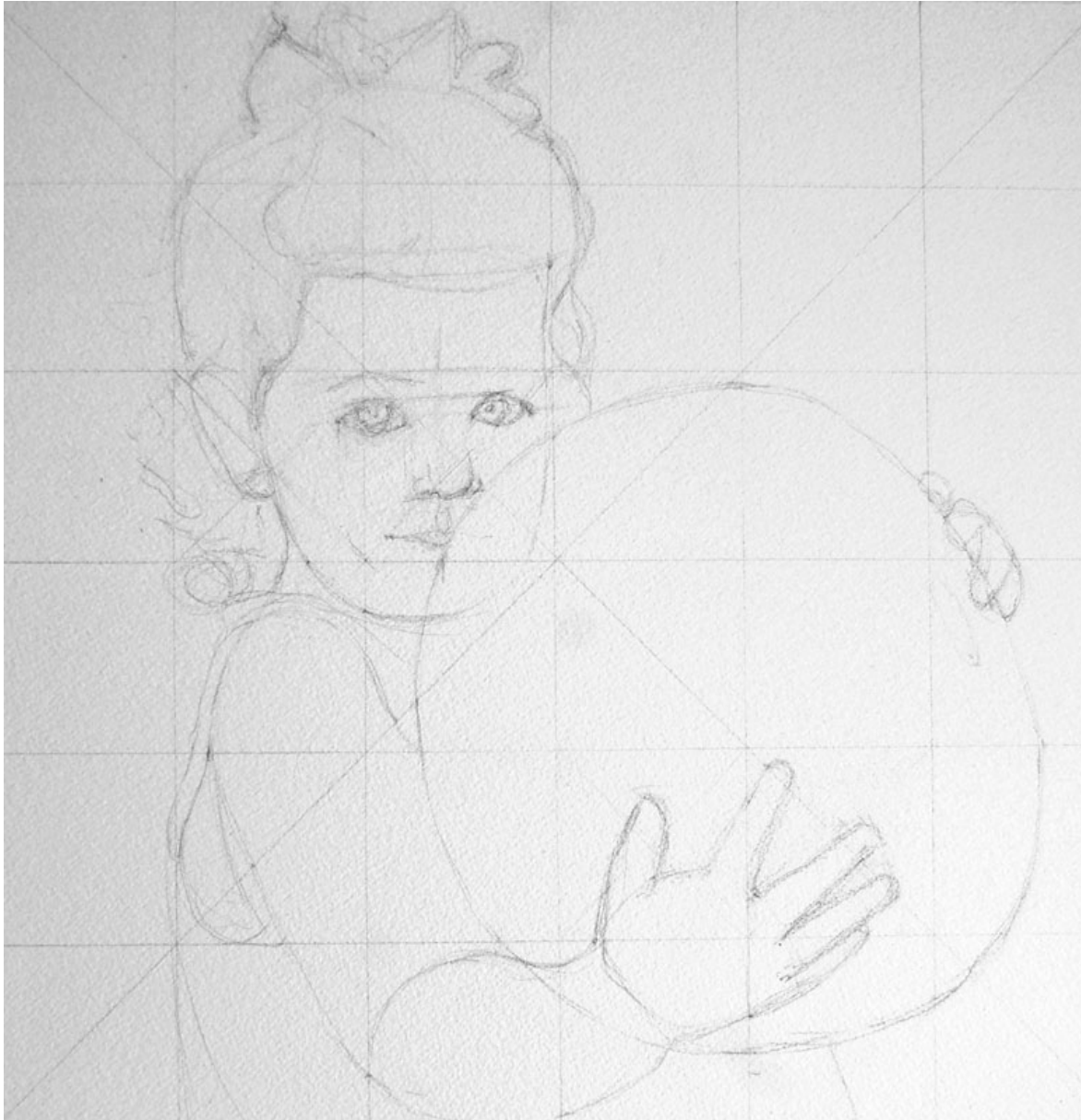
How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 1. I started with a thumbnail sketch, with a bit of color to help me plan the painting and communicate to the client what I see when I look at their photo.

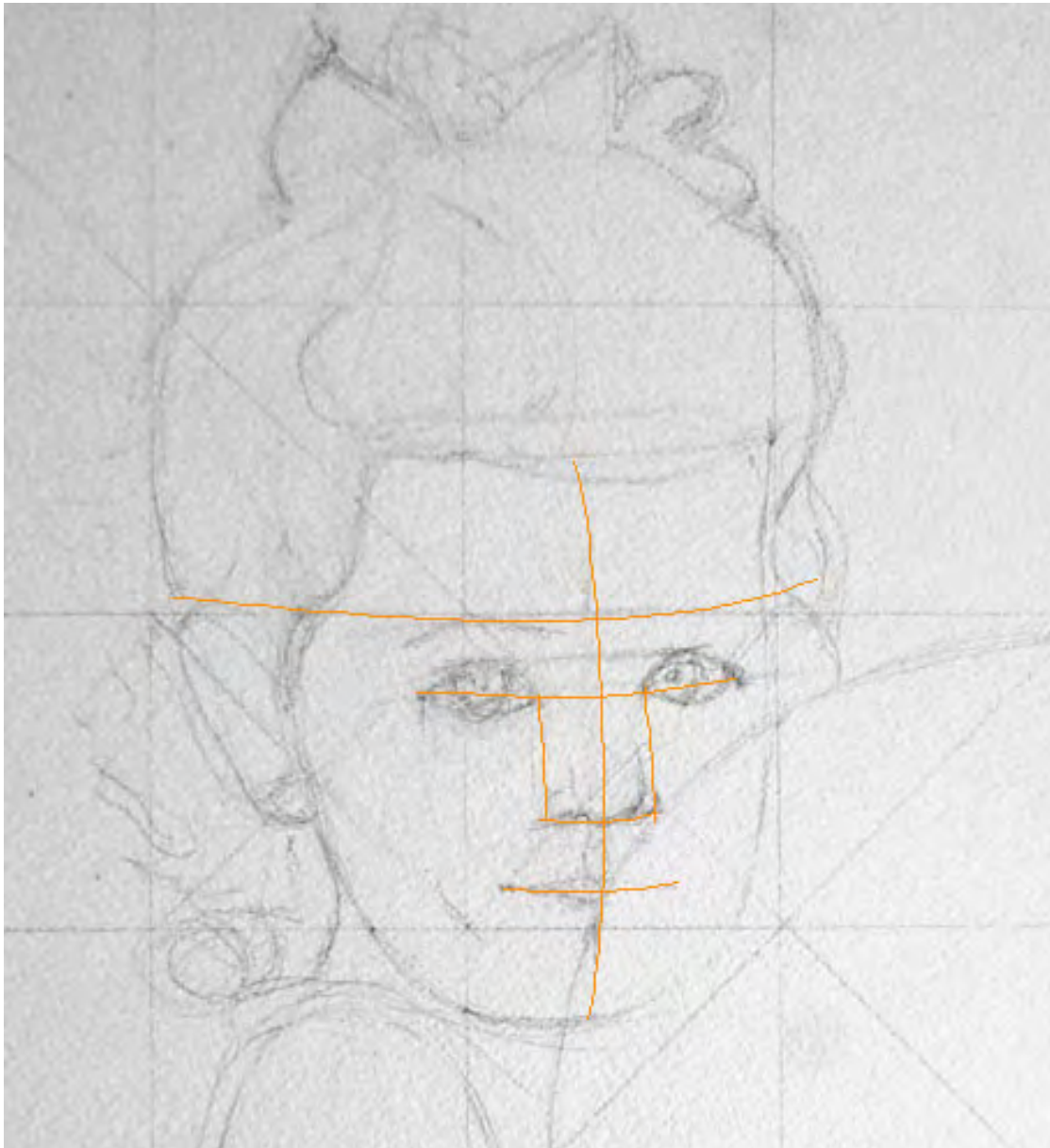
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Step 2. After the sketch,
I stretched my paper and made the
drawing using the grid method.



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A word about using the grid method with portraits: after you find your reference points and locate the facial features, make sure you double-check your drawing with the usual facial proportions rules. I.e, the vertical center line hits the features in the middle, the horizontal lines of the eyes, bottom of the nose, and mouth are parallel, the distance between the eyes is approximately the width of one eye, the lines from the wings of the nose to the inside corners of the eyes are parallel.



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Step 3: wet-into-wet

background wash and ultramarine blue in the shadow areas. I also put light yellow, red, and orange washes over the skin areas.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 4. I continue working on the hair and face, put a wash over the shadow side of the pumpkin and reclaim the round shape of the pumpkin on the right using a scrubber brush.

Note: a scrubber brush is a stiff synthetic bristle brush with very short hairs and usually rounded top. Most of the major art supply stores carry them, at least online. Blick, Cheap Joe's, and Jerry's Artarama manufacture their own sets. Some of my students also get them at Hobby Lobby.

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I use scrubber brushes for softening edges. I have to be very careful when I do it, though, as these little brushes have a lot of lifting power and it's easy to overdo the softening. I often use an old synthetic (golden Taklon or similar) watercolor brush for this purpose. It gives me just a little bit of blur while not lifting off too much pigment.

Step 5. more work on the pumpkin and main shapes of the face. I also deepen the skin tones using transparent quinacridone red and quinacridone burnt sienna.



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Step 6. I might be guilty in spending too much time and effort on the hair, but I just can't help it. I like painting hair. I darken the shadows throughout the painting, define the eyes, soften the hard edges around the hand and add detail to fingers and the girl's dress. Almost done.



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Step 7. From the last stage to the completed painting, it's just a matter of deepening the shadows even more and refining the important details. I also add a few spots of semi-opaque yellow to the pumpkin and, in a more transparent manner, the girl's face.

These last steps seem fairly insignificant, and you may say that the main idea of the painting was already stated in the previous stage - but they often take the longest time with a lot of reflection and evaluation.

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When my additions
and refinements are no longer
making the painting better,
I declare it finished.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



I find it important to take it slowly at the end, so that I have a lot of opportunities to step away from the painting and come back to it with a fresh eye. It helps me catch myself before I overwork it - although, of course, the level of finish is very subjective.

Some other artist would have stopped twenty hours ago, while another one might want to work it to a more realistic stage.



Elijah

Portrait Study

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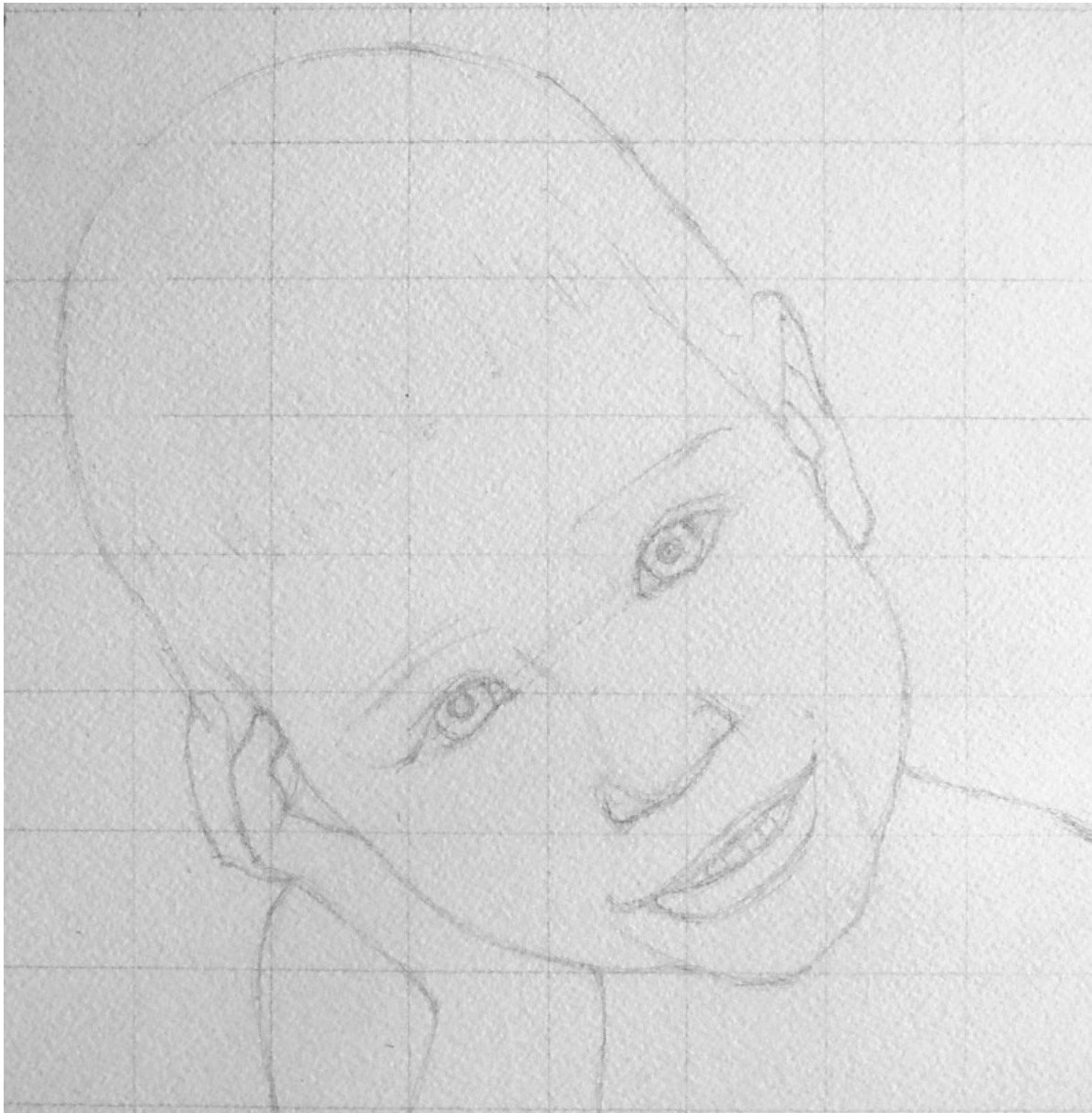
I took this photo of my son indoors, in a fairly well-lit room. The image (below) looked too dark though, especially in the shadows. I used Photoshop's Levels tool with Lighten Shadows preset to arrive at the picture on the left.



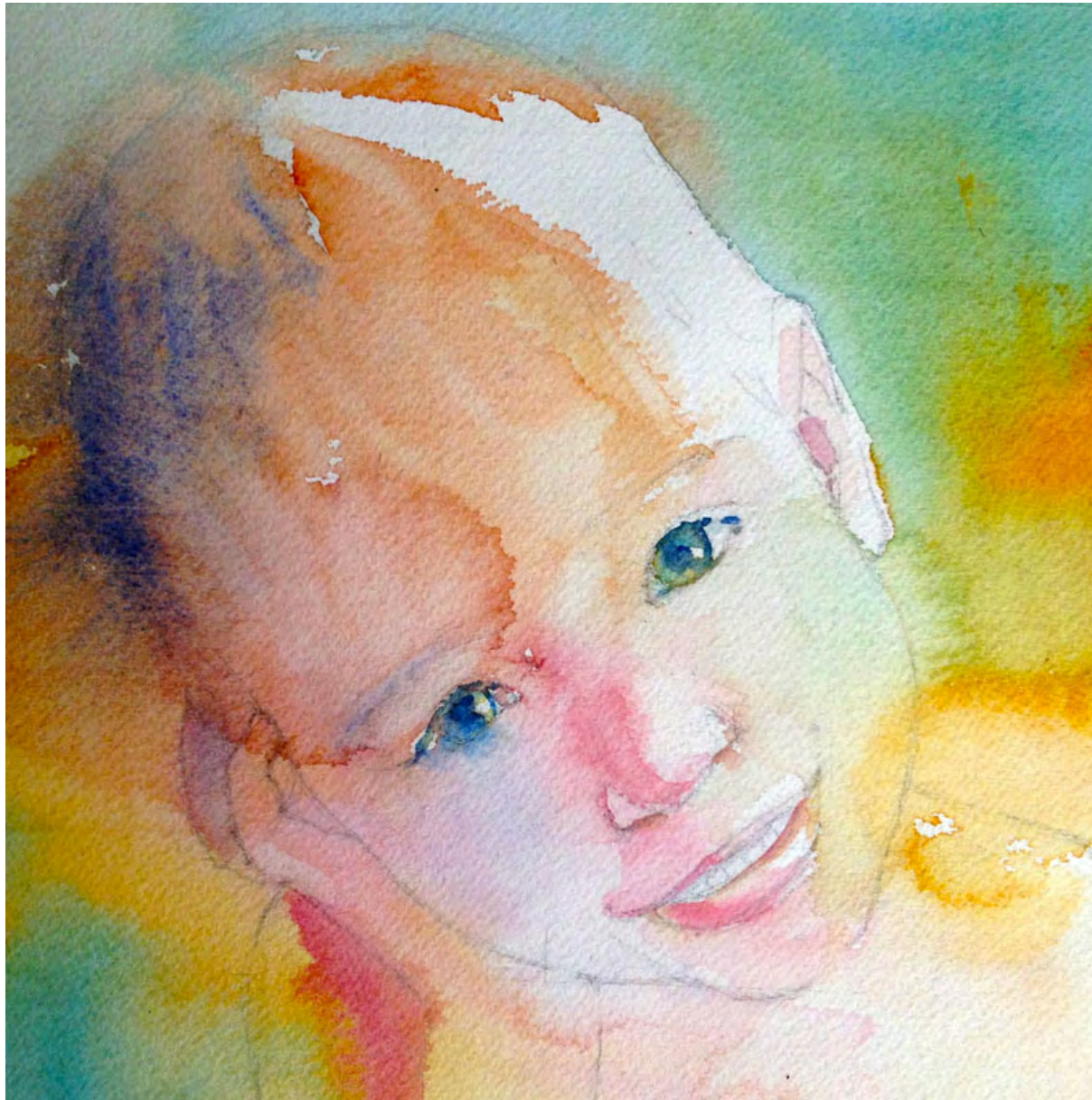
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When working with photos, it is easy to get carried away with trying to stay true to the picture. But what the camera sees and what your eye sees are very different images. Cameras tend to flatten and darken the shadows, so lightening them is one way to trick your mind into seeing the reference photo closer to what the subject actually looks like. This is especially true when painting children: dark, harsh shadows make them look older.

Step 1. I make the drawing using the grid method.



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Step 2. First wash. I like to keep it very loose and wet in the beginning. I take care to leave white areas on the lit side of his head, tip of his nose, and highlights on his lips and in his eyes.

At this stage, the colors run into each other and blooms happen. This is nothing to stress out about! The plan is to leave things bold and free in the background and refine the head by adding more washes on top and lifting some color off.

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Step 3. Doing mostly negative painting this layer (painting with darker color around lighter shapes - i.e., see how I darkened his cheek next to the hand it rests on? Same with the hair falling on his forehead: I am painting the darker color of the skin in shadow, around his blond hair).

I could have called it done at this point but I wanted more definition.

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Step 4. Adding depth.

What it really means for the most part, is darkening the darks, lightening the lights. Increasing contrast between light and dark areas.

It's easy to get carried away at this stage, and overwork it until it looks lifeless. This is the danger of working from photographs. Try to step away from your painting once in a while and look at your reference photo a bit less. The goal is to capture the personality, not render every single hair.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 5. I decided to separate his right cheek from the background by placing a green wash next to it. And I felt that the cheek looked a bit too flat, so I added another two light layers of paint. A touch of darker paint in the eyes, a subtle green wash on the right side of his head to tie it in with the background. All done!

This is my favorite painting of my son to date and it made a fantastic gift to my parents.



Simon

A Watercolor
Child Portrait

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Some time last year, I had the pleasure of working on two custom portraits for a girl named Laura. I painted her two sons, adding to her growing collection of family portraits created by different artists. It was fun! She let me choose from several reference photos and we worked together to arrive at paintings that made both of us happy. She is pretty much my perfect client!

This is one of those portraits. Simon is the older child and Laura wanted a painting based on one of her favorite photos of him as a toddler. I typically advise for the reference photos to have a strong light and shadow pattern, preferably in natural light and to avoid pictures taken with a flash or those with softer, diffused light. Or backlight. This just happened to be a backlit photo.

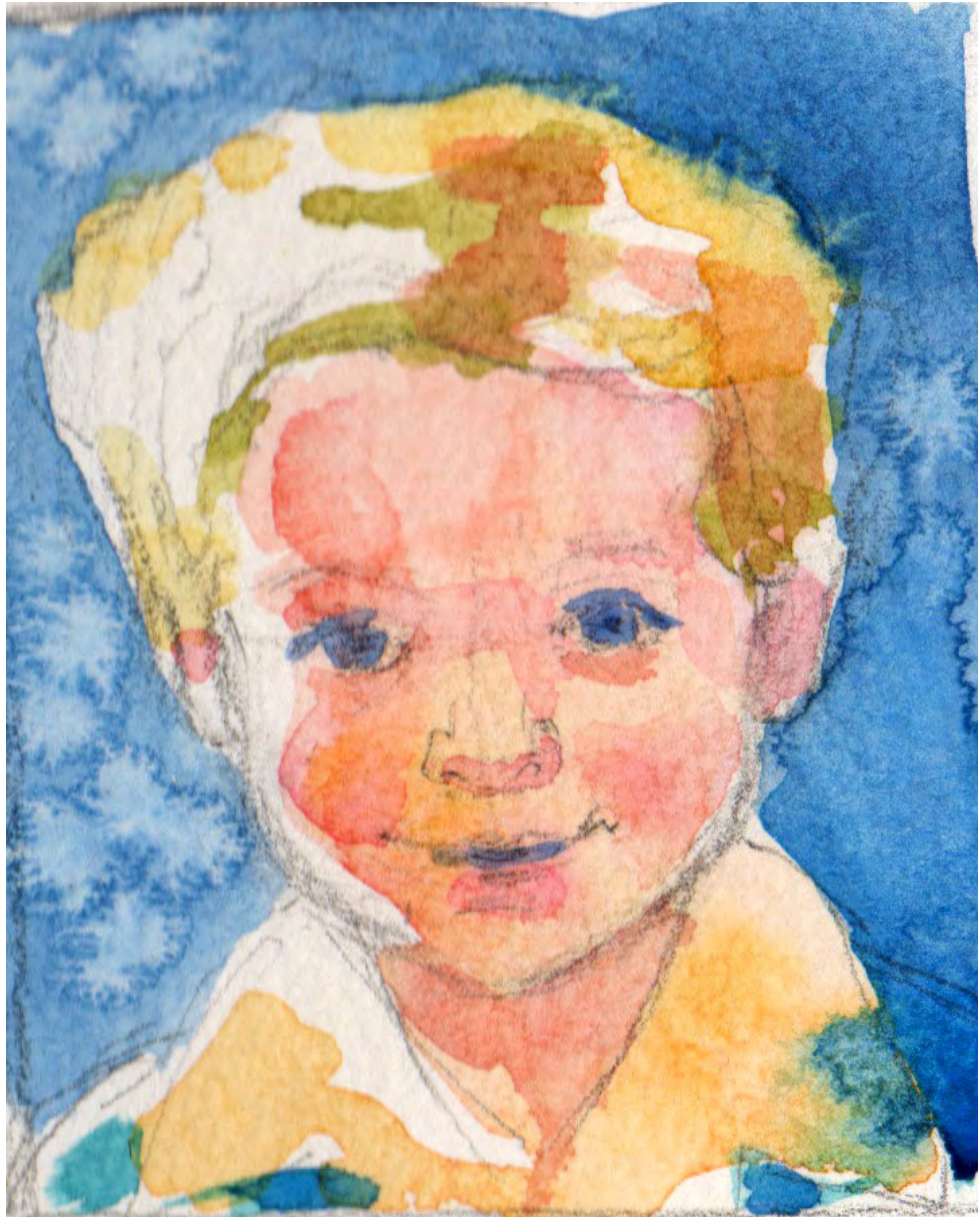
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If you are a beginning painter, it could make things difficult. The variation of values in the face becomes very subtle and you need a good understanding of facial structure to make it convincing. But it's doable and incidentally, two of my portraits I'm rather fond of have back light.



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Step 1.

As always, I started with a thumbnail sketch.

I do this to get a general feel for the personality and mood of my subject and to give the client an idea of the end result. Sometimes, I do more than one sketch, trying out different compositions, crops, colors, value schemes. Once the sketch is approved, I move on to the drawing.

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Step 2.

Drawing.

You can barely see anything here because in portraits, I tend to keep the drawing minimal. I don't map out areas of light and shadows and prefer to do that with paint. This drawing was made using grid method directly on the watercolor paper.





Step 3.

Initial washes.

Very lightly, I mapped out main shadow areas, while leaving most highlights as the white of the paper.

From now on, it's building up the layers with the general idea of keeping the color cooler in the shadows and warmer in the lights.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



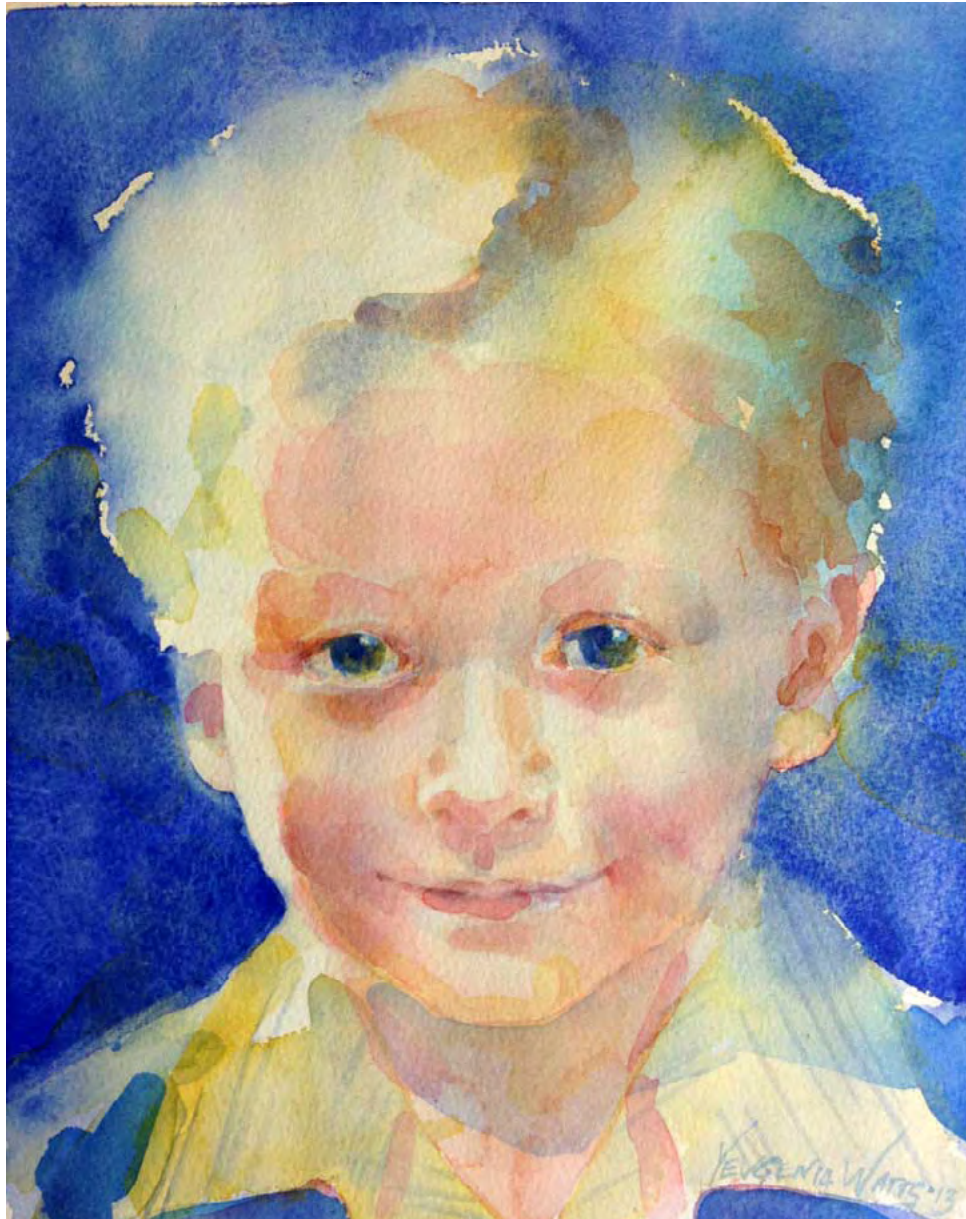
Step 4.

Some more modeling (adding depth, increasing contrast) here. Still keeping the highlights white.



Step 5.

Most of the time, my portrait palette consists of a yellow, a red, and a blue. Sometimes, there is an additional version of each color - a cool red (quinacridone red), a cool yellow (quinacridone gold), a warm yellow (indian or hansa yellow), and a warm blue (french ultramarine or cobalt). In this painting, I also had small areas of phtalo blue (cool blue).



Step 6.

Getting close to done. This image looks a bit pale compared to the previous one because of the different lighting when I took the pictures. I softened some of the edges and signed it. I felt that it was at the stage where it was still lively but not overdone. When I sent it to Laura for approval, however, she wanted a greater level of detail and depth. And so the work continued!

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 7.

Working with smaller brushes, increasing value contrast (i.e. making dark things darker next to light things, which makes them pop), softening some edges.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



And the finished, color-corrected version!

She loved it.



Theo

Watercolor
Portrait
Step by Step

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



This is Theo, the little brother of Simon (above).

Step 1. My first step is a thumbnail sketch, in color (see next page). I use thumbnail sketches like these for three purposes:

1. This is the initial translation of a photo to an artwork that I do. It lets my collector see what I see when I look at their photo. It gives them a rough idea of the final result.

2. In the absence of a live model (not that I paint dead models...wait, yes, I do...) -

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



35

anyway, most of the time, people, kids especially, do not sit for my portraits. They send me photos and these photos are the only source of information about them that I have. So, spending some time with the pictures, and making these little sketches of them, is a way for me to get to know them a little better.

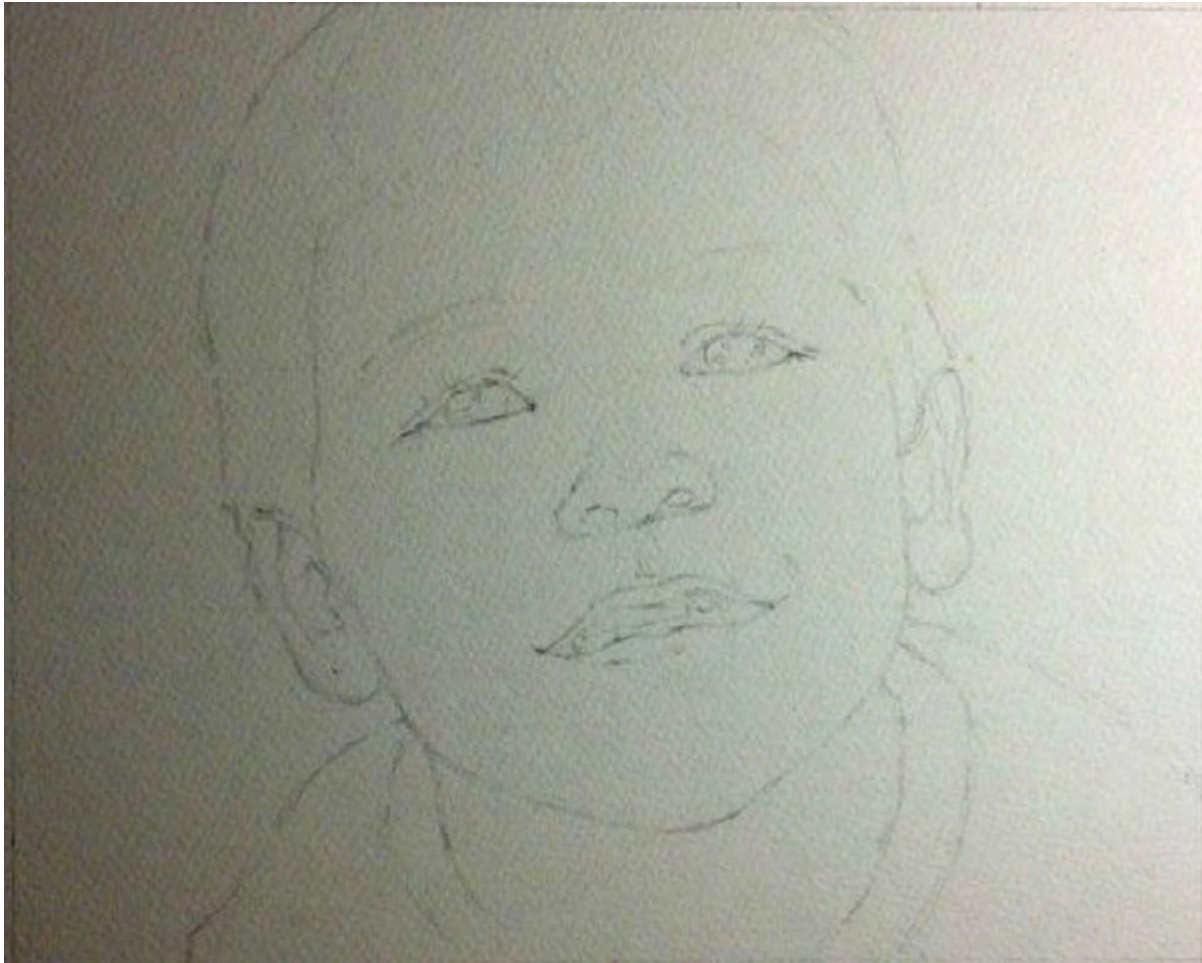
3. Finally, these sketches are essential tools I use for planning my paintings. How much of the photo do I crop? Do I need to rotate things? Move something? Delete something? Which colors will I use?

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

Which values will work best? All of these questions can be worked out in advance, in a thumbnail sketch.

On to **Step 2**, Drawing.

I used grid method for this drawing (see Bonus chapter)



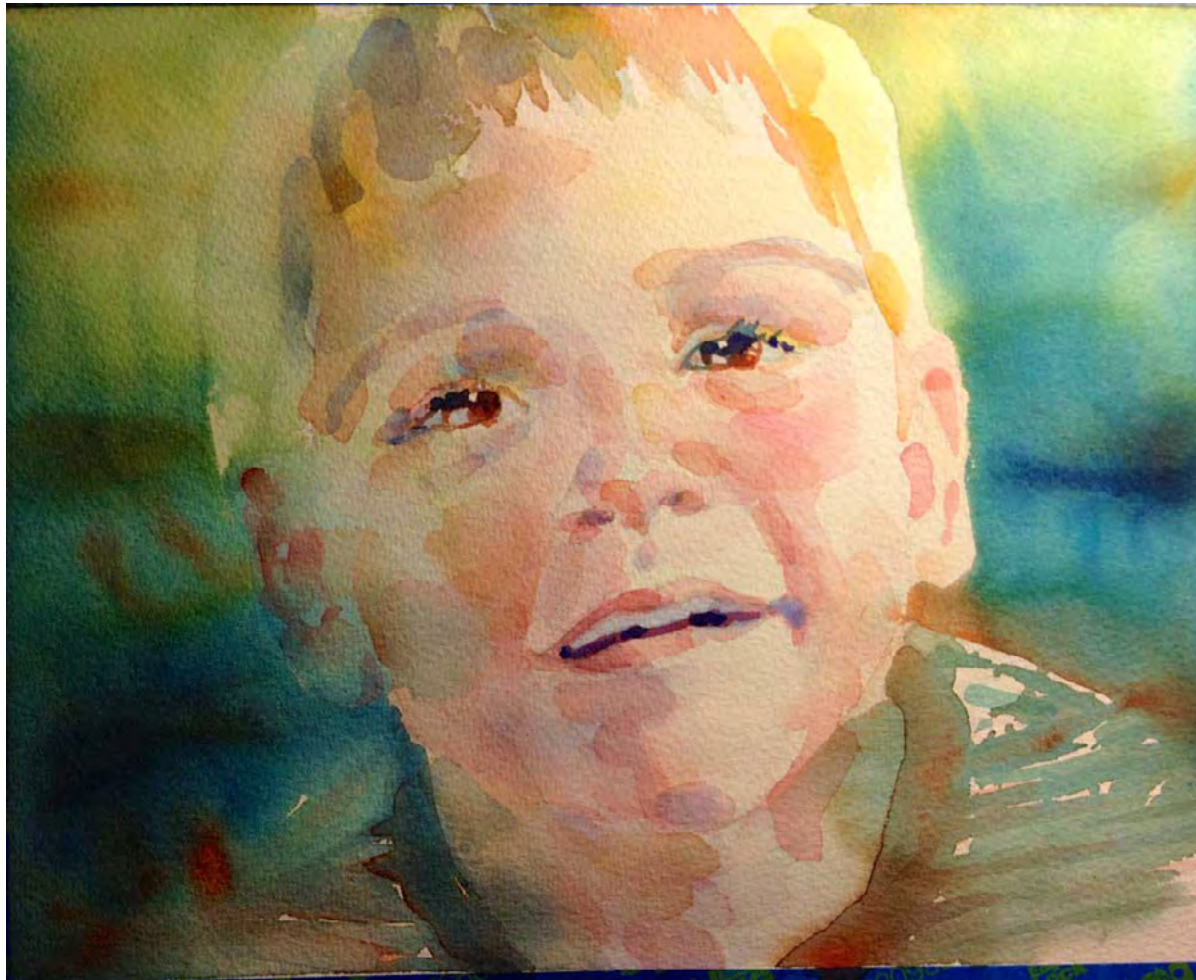
How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 3.

First couple of layers. I keep things very wet at this point and paint runs all over the place. Yes, the green background bled into the boy's face but that's okay. Keep reading :)

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 4.

Once my first wash was dry, I lifted off some of the green on his face and began adding definition to the shadow areas.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 5.

Adding light blue washes on his forehead, chin, and above his eyes. Defining his eyes, nose, lips, and ears more. More texture along the hairline.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 6. I don't always do it, but in this particular portrait, I smoothed out much of my brushwork on face. This will give the painting a more finished, detailed, and polished look. For that, I use a soft synthetic brush. Here's my favorite one:



40

This is a Cotman 1/2" flat brush but any softish synthetic brush will do. I originally bought it for the one and only watercolor class I took in the U.S., and it didn't take as a painting brush. It's great for blurring the edges though.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 7.

I added another background wash to deepen the color. A little more fiddling with the details.



Step 8.

The background wash left a hard edge around the head (phtalo blue tends to do that). So I softened the edge and lifted off some hairs here and there.

Done!



Vaughn

Watercolor
Portrait
of a Boy

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I had a choice of several very good photos to work from. I love it when collectors trust me to make a recommendation, or even decision, on what photo would make a better painting. At this point, I can work from unimaginably bad snapshots but it's always easier to begin with a good photo reference. Out of the photos I was given, I liked the one I ended up painting right away, and the collector also suggested one with the classic looking-straight-at-the-camera pose.



Step 1.

I made two thumbnail sketches based on the two photos we chose. The sketches help me get more familiar with my subject and also kind of test out my initial feelings about the reference photos. I definitely liked the second one better, and after a discussion with the collector, she agreed with me.

The first sketch is your standard kid picture (minus the usual toothy grin). Any kid.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

This sketch, on the other hand, is definitely a particular kid, the one with the attitude and his own thoughts in his head, and it's Vaughn.





Step 2.

Drawing using the grid method. Since I had both a **tilt** and a **turn** to his head in this portrait, it was important for me to double-check the grid drawing with a few ellipses connecting the facial features of the boy. If you have no idea what I'm talking about or want a refresher course, I recommend the free YouTube videos by Stan Prokopenko ('Proko'). Good stuff!

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

Step 3.

I jumped right in! Beginning with the eyes (I felt that they were the most important part of the painting).



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Step 4.

I like to integrate the figure and the background (vs. painting them separately), so here is what it looked like after one wash. At this point, I let it dry.



Step 5.

The background is left as it is. I concentrate on the face, defining the main light and shade patterns. It helps to know where your light is coming from. In this case, it's on the top left. This means, for example, that the left side of the boy's head will be a bit lighter than the right.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

Step 6.

More detail on the face and arms. I also decided to define the edge of his farther shoulder by placing a light background wash next to it.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

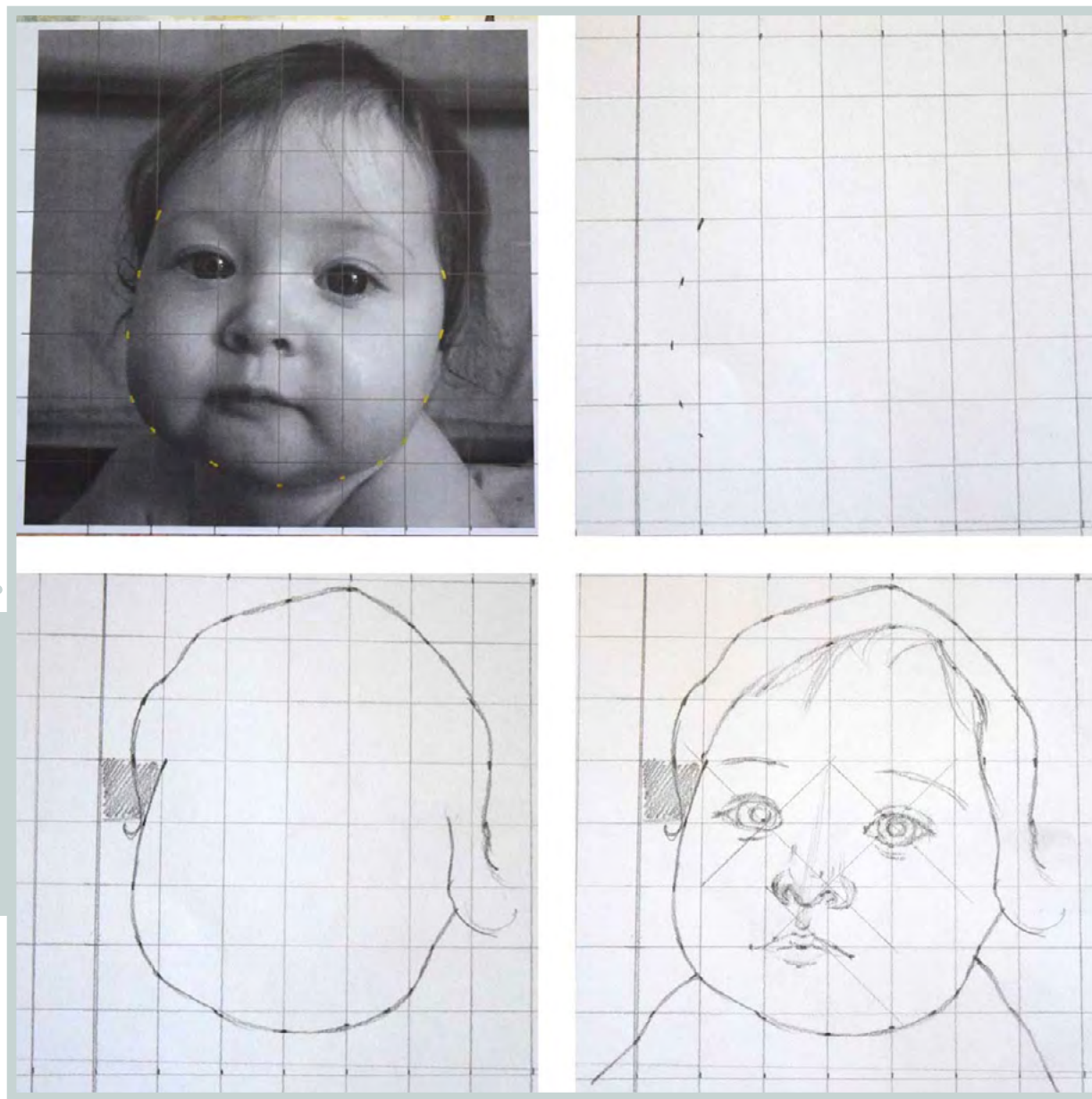


Vaughn with his portrait.

This was a Christmas gift for his dad and it was a hit!

Bonus

Using grid
method with
photos

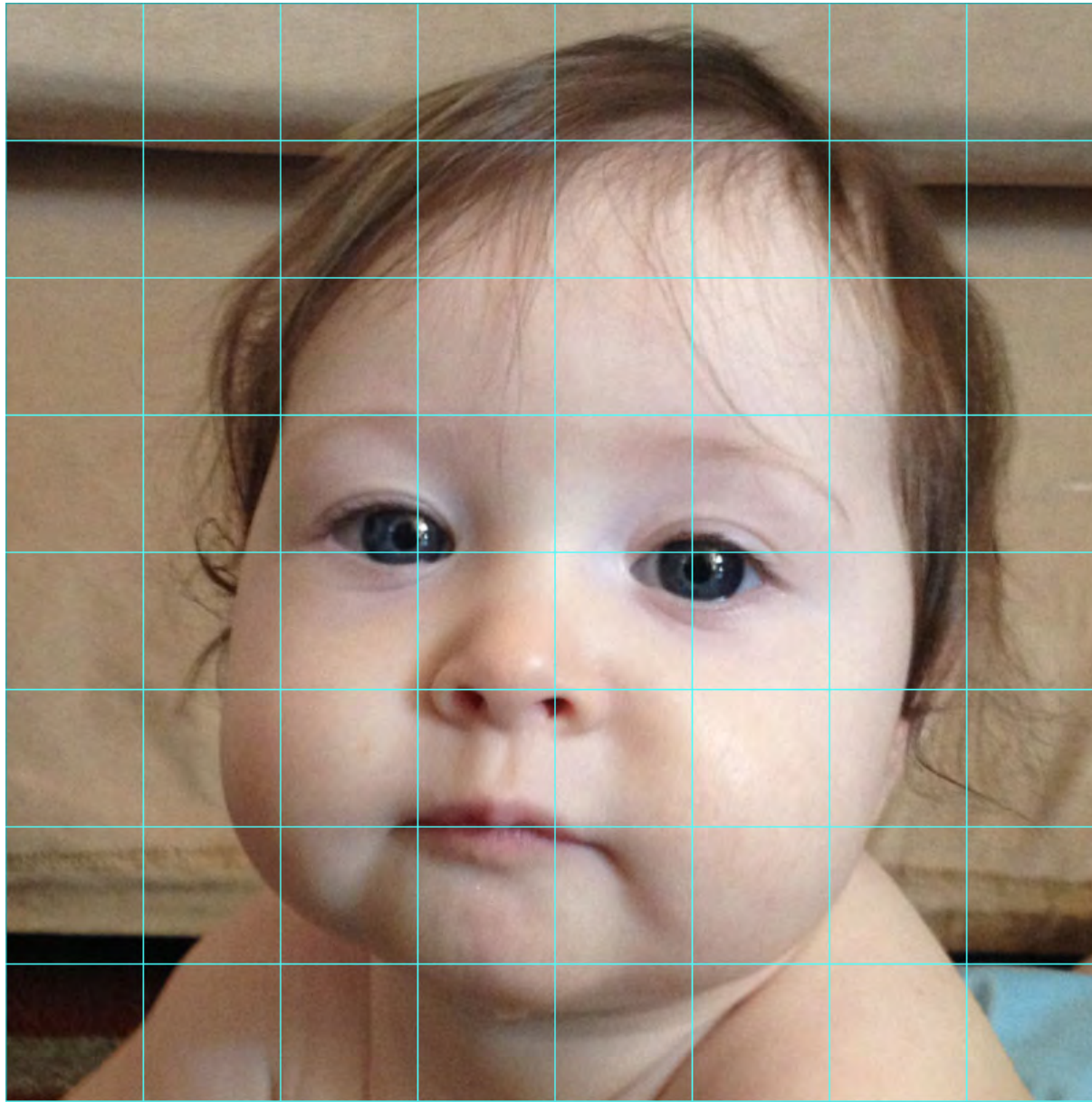


How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

1. First, I decide on the crop and format of my reference photo and the size of the finished painting. In my example here, I decided to zoom in on the face and use a square format for the painting. The size of my finished painting is 8x8”.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



2. I use Photoshop to prepare my reference photos for painting. After cropping, I set the Image Size (in this case, 8x8”) and Grid settings. Here, I set the grid so that I have a line every inch, both horizontally and vertically. Depending on the image, I may change the color of the grid lines to black, for greater contrast.

I make sure that the grid is showing (**View > Show > Grid**)

3. I take a screenshot of this image and print it out in grayscale. Making it black and white is optional but it makes the

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

drawing easier to transfer and it shows you the values in the photo without getting confused by color.

If you are not using Photoshop, you can easily make the grid using a printed out photo, a ruler, and a pencil. If your finished painting size is 8x8" and you want grid every square inch, divide the width of the photo by 8, make vertical lines from the marks, and repeat for the height of the photo.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



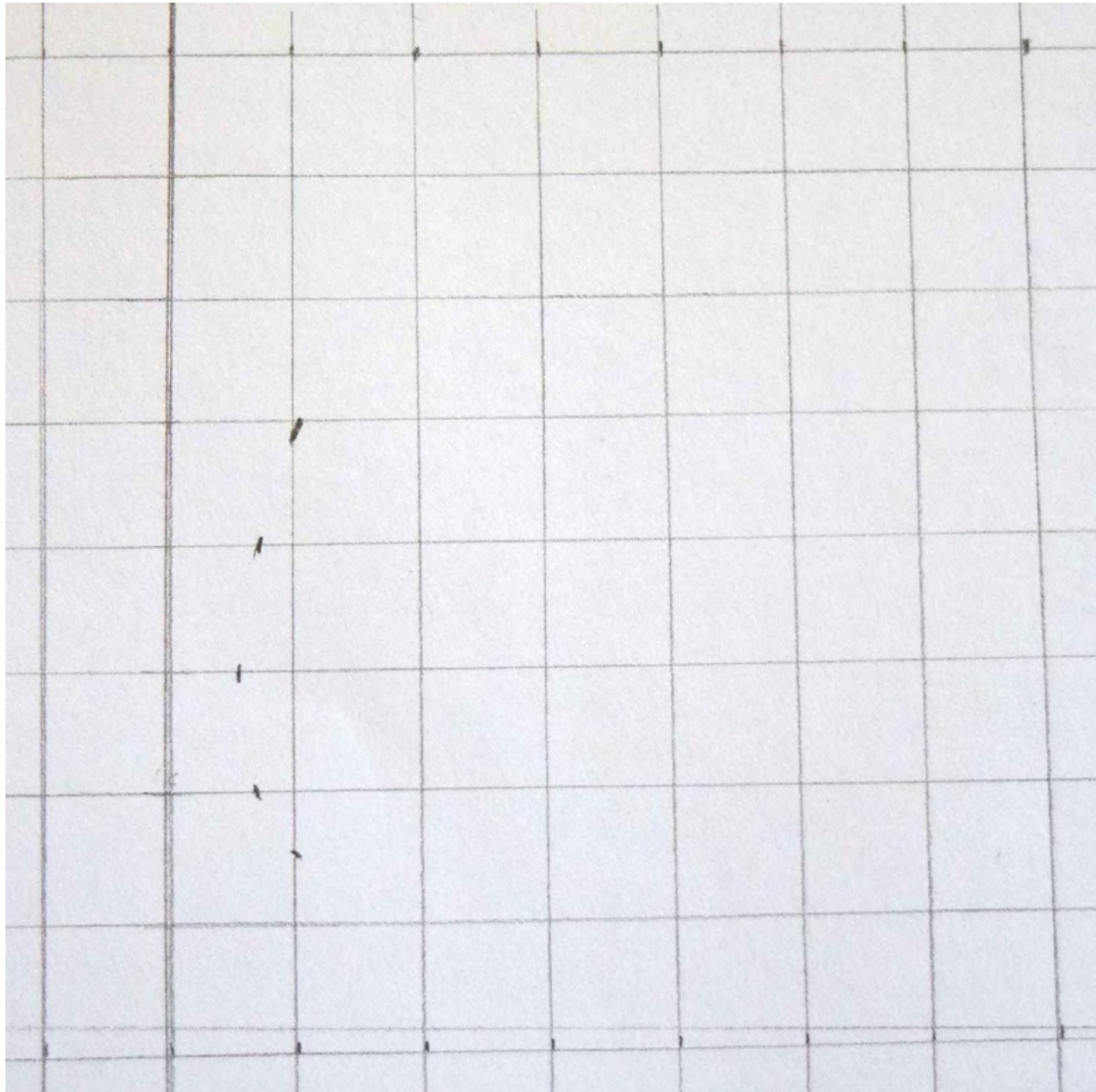
Note: an easy way to divide a line by 8 is to first find the middle (which divides it in two), then find the middle of the two sections you just created, then repeat for the four resulting sections.

57

The most important thing to remember is that the proportions of the photo and of the finished painting need to be the same.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



4. Now, I repeat the grid on my painting surface (in this example, an 4x4" piece of sketchbook paper, with some space around the 8x8" area for the border). Some watercolor artists prefer to use drawing or tracing paper for this step and trace the drawing onto the watercolor paper later.

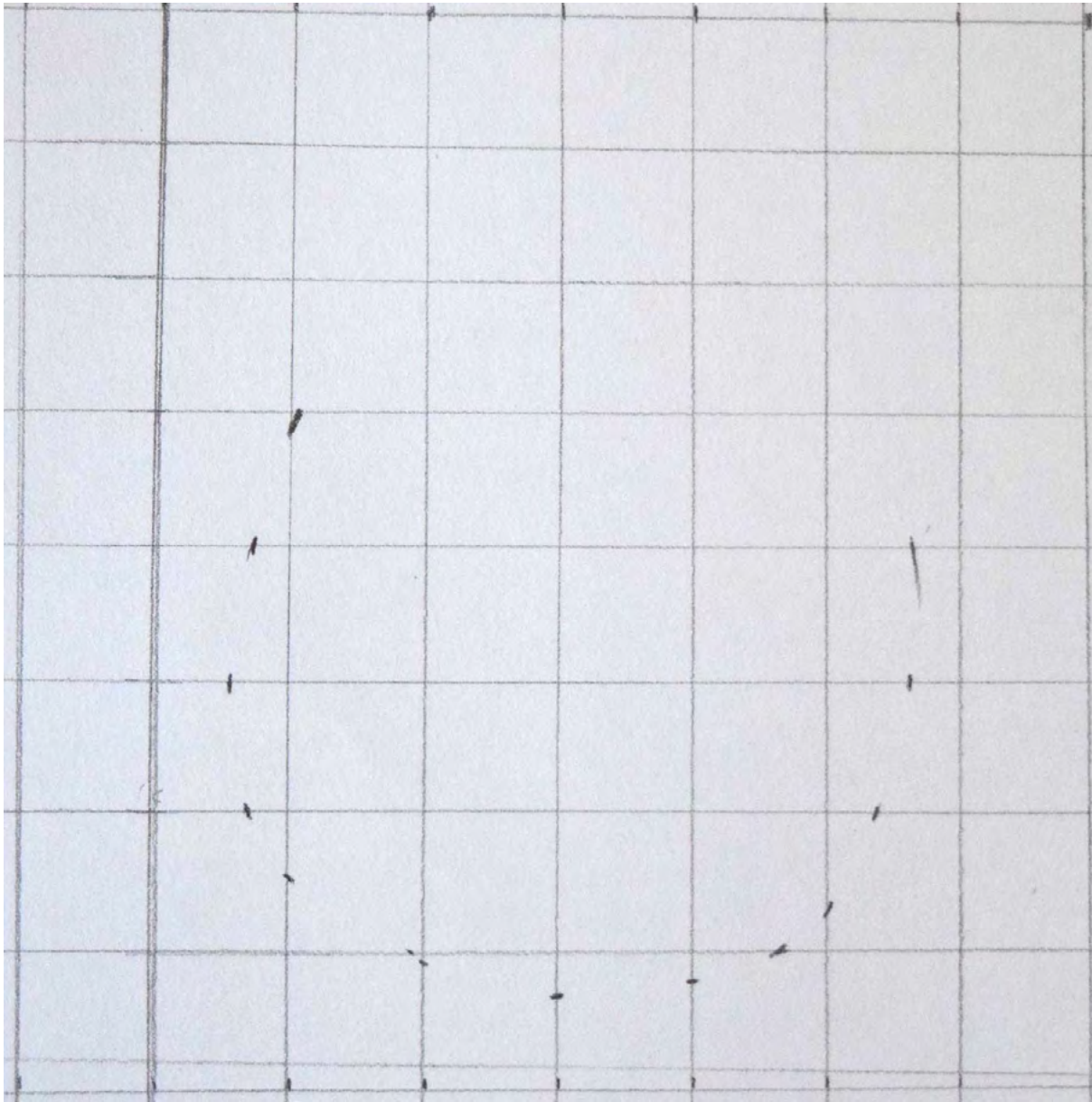
Here, I also started marking where the outline of the baby's face is intersecting the grid (see next page).

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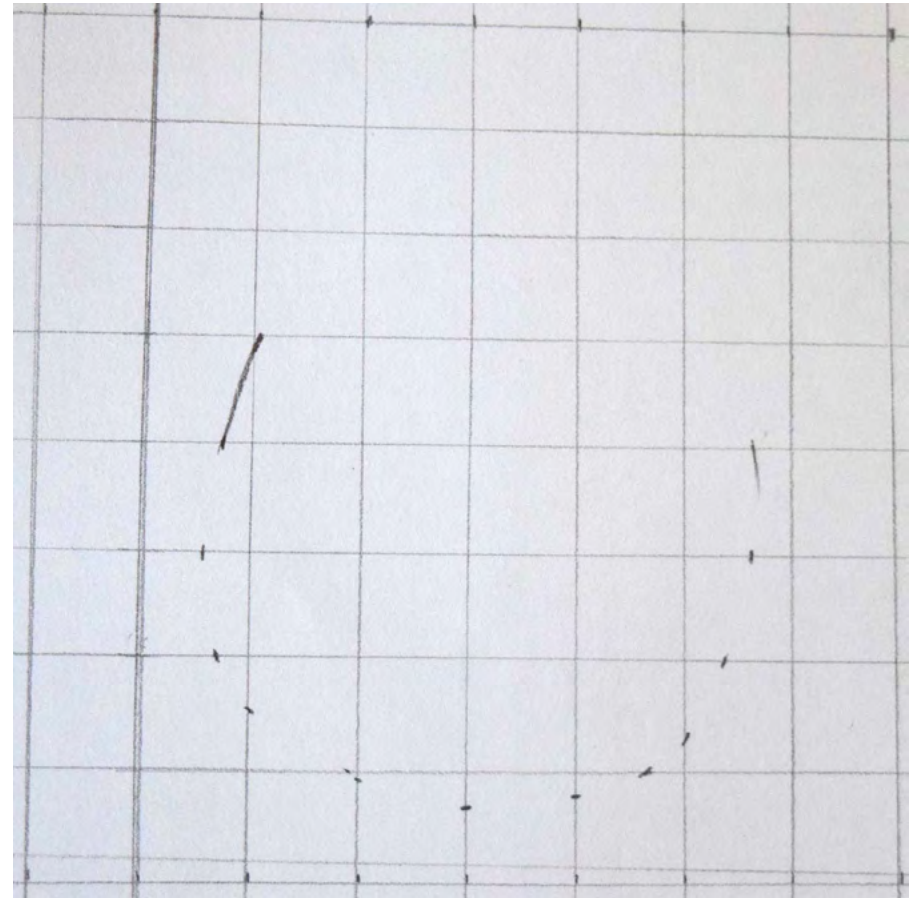
5. Pick a line that you want to transfer. I started with the outline of the face. Then, working one square of the grid at a time, I find where the line is intersecting with the lines of the grid. I place a mark at the points of intersection.



60



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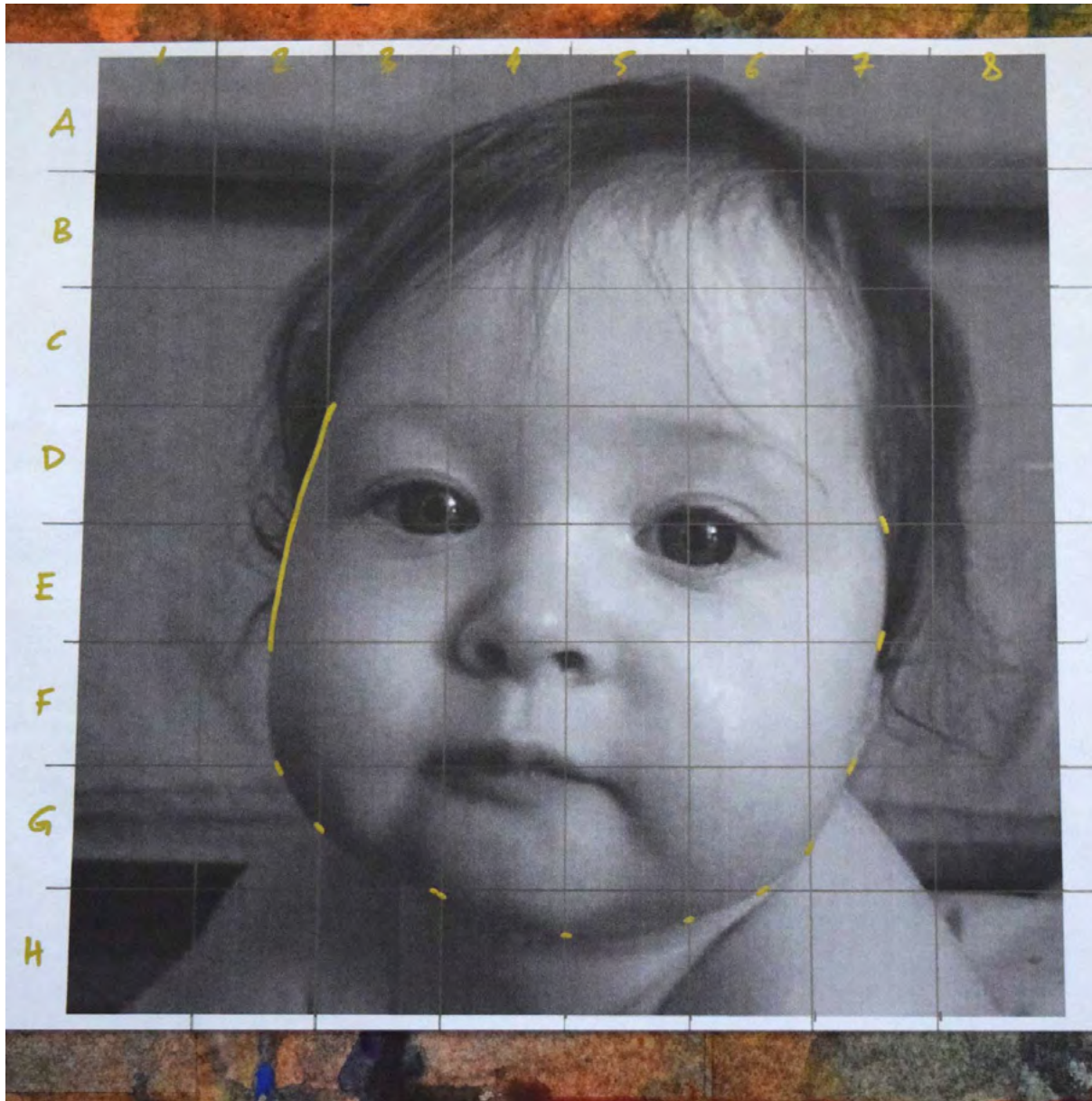
61

7. Start connecting the dots.

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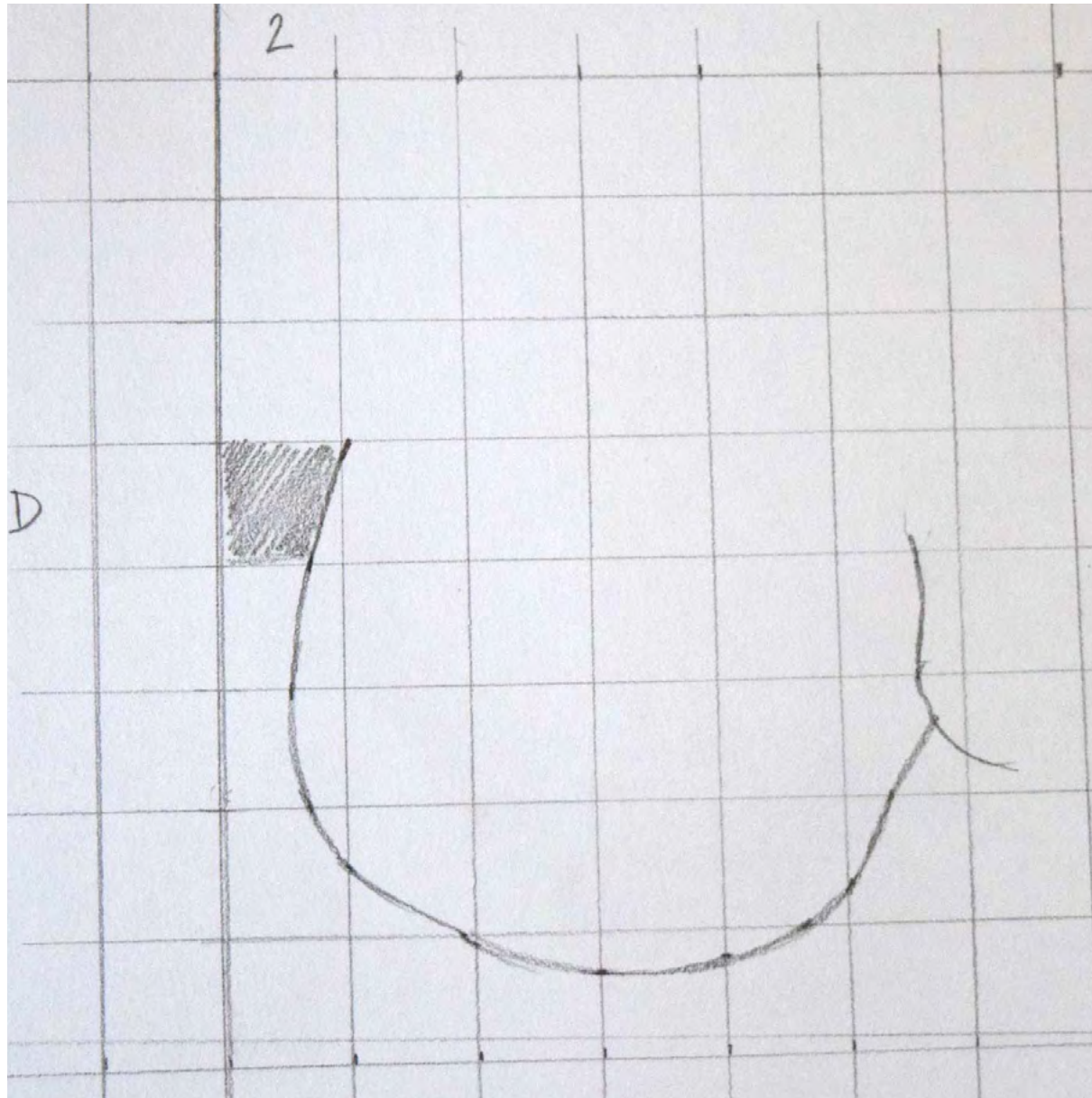
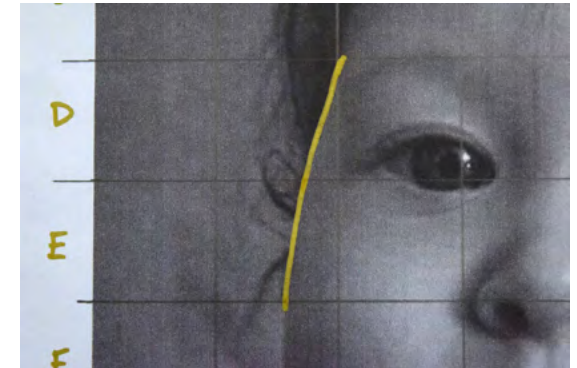
Note: If you find it hard to follow which cell of the grid on the reference photo corresponds to which one on your paper, you may want to introduce some battleship type system. Letters for the rows, numbers for the columns, or vice versa.

Some (a whole lot more organized) artists even approach this process by starting in one corner (A1) and moving, cell by cell, left to right, top to bottom. Do what works for you.

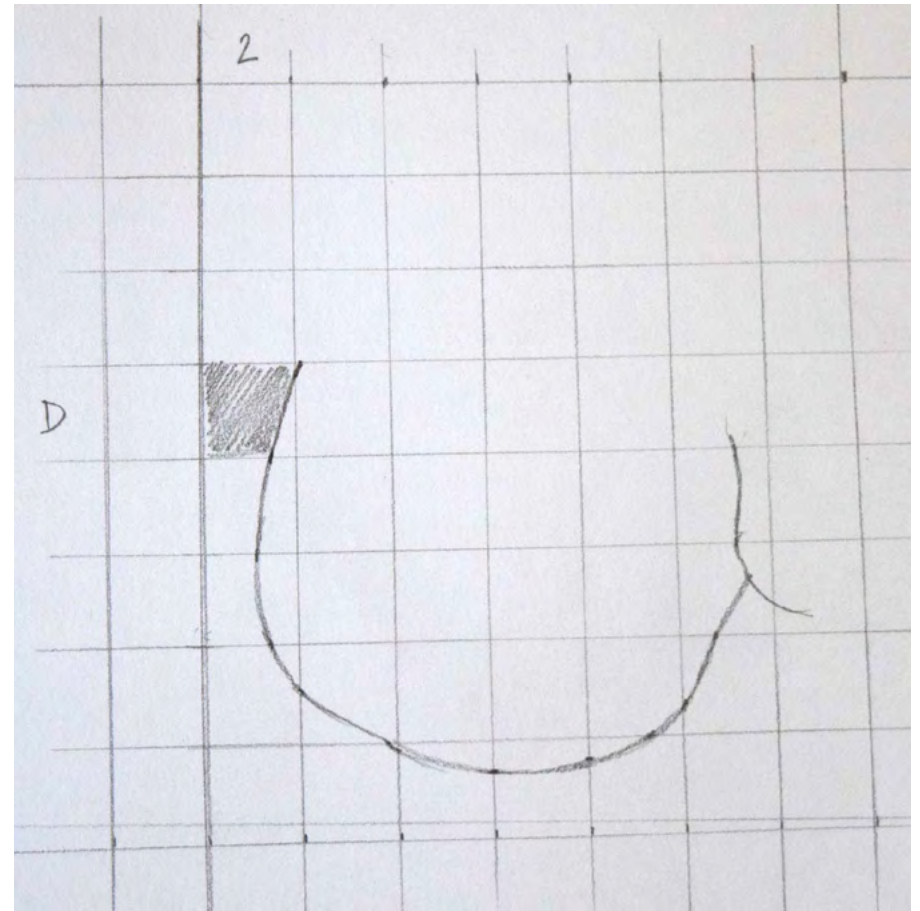


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Here is an example
where I isolated cell D2



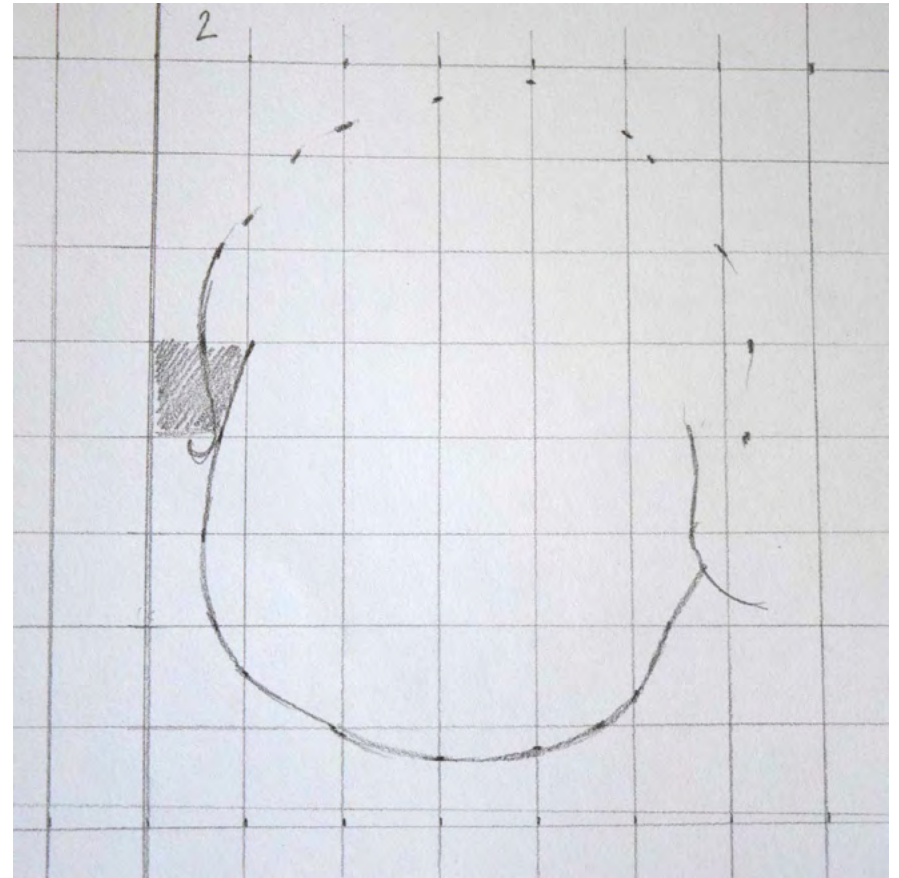
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64

8. Dots connected and we have our first line!

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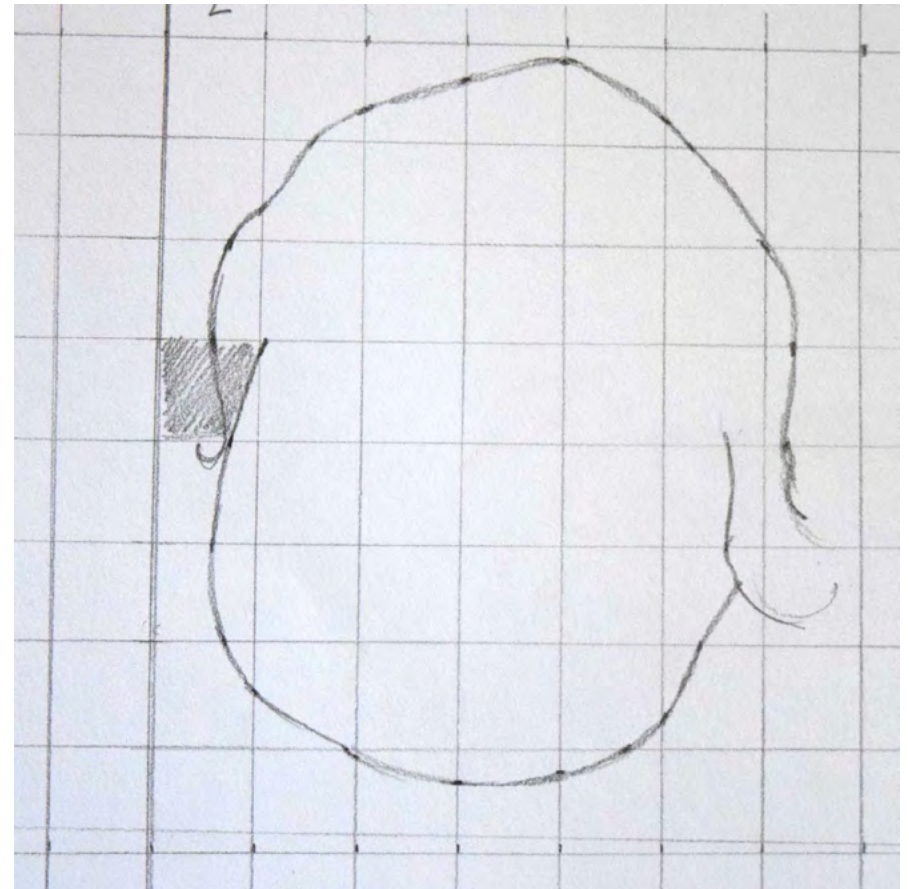


65

9. Next line. Work from large to small shapes.

Establish the spots where the outline of the head intersects the grid.

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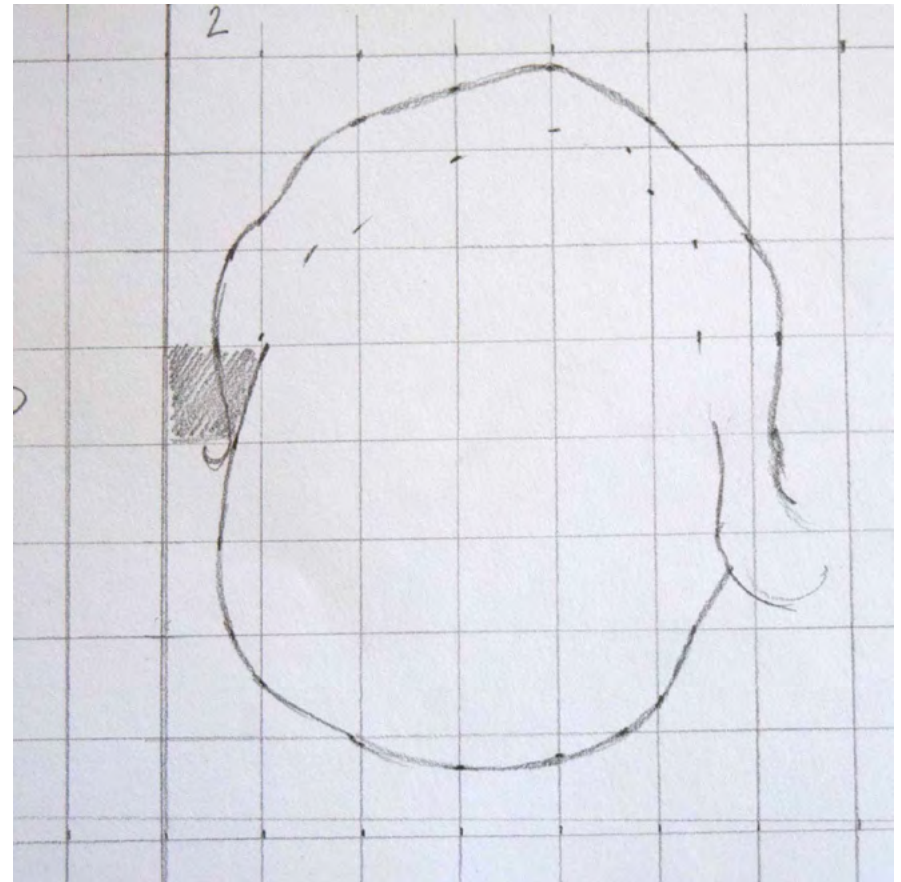
66

...and connect the dots!

Congratulations, we have a head.

(Insert appropriate birth-related humor here ;))

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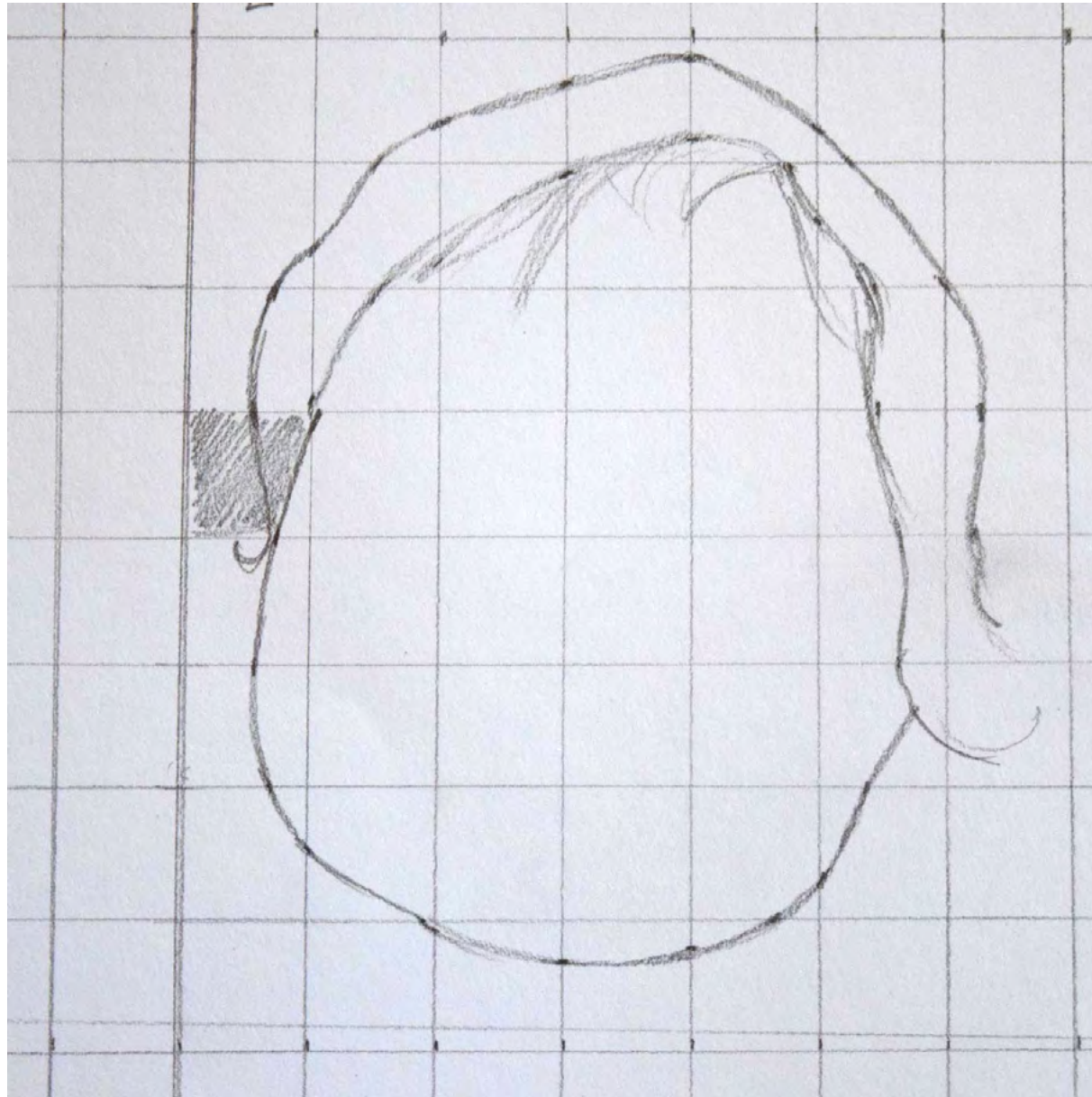


67

9. Now, the hairline.

Find the dots...

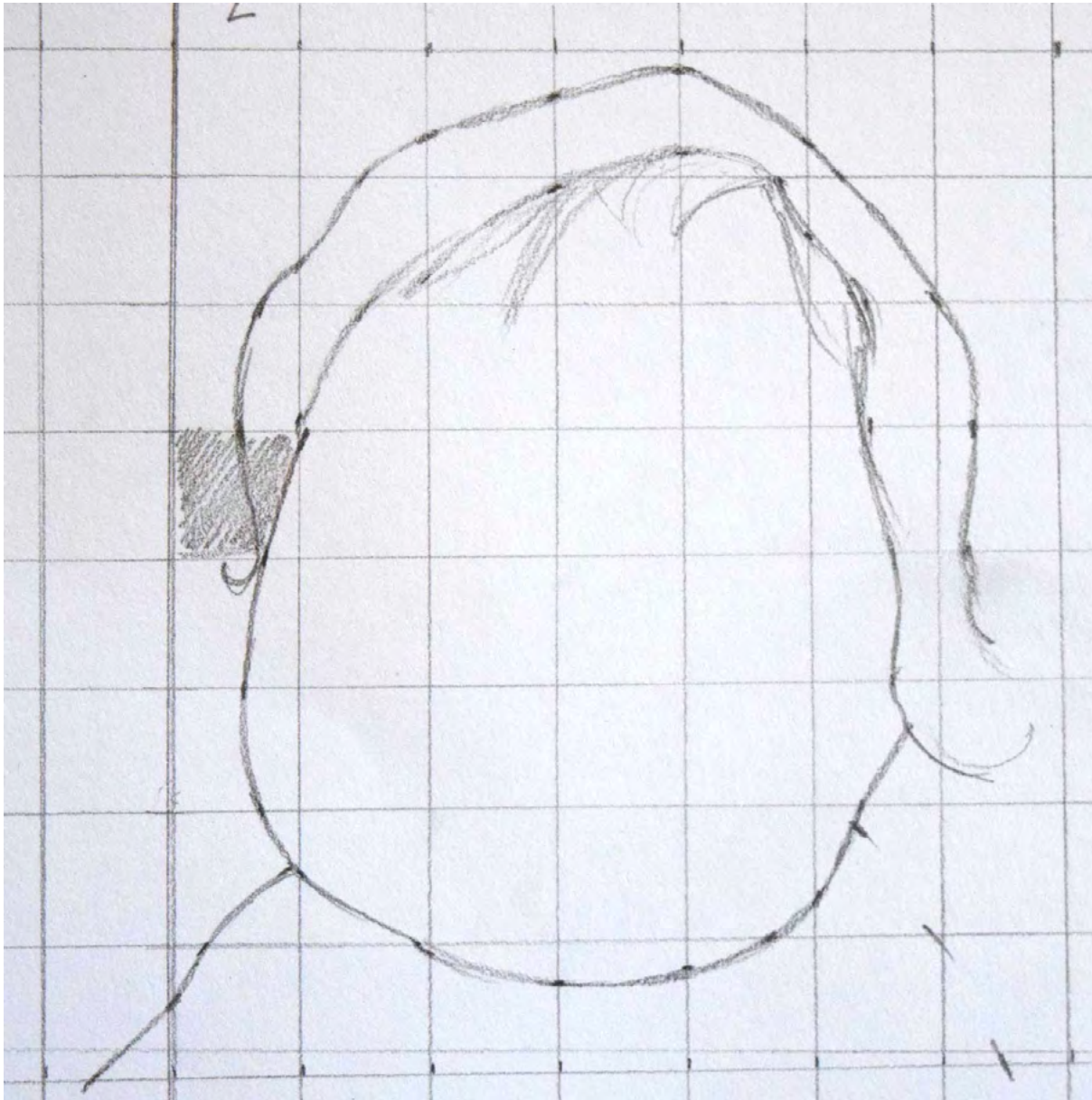
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...and connect them.

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10. Repeat for
the shoulder lines.



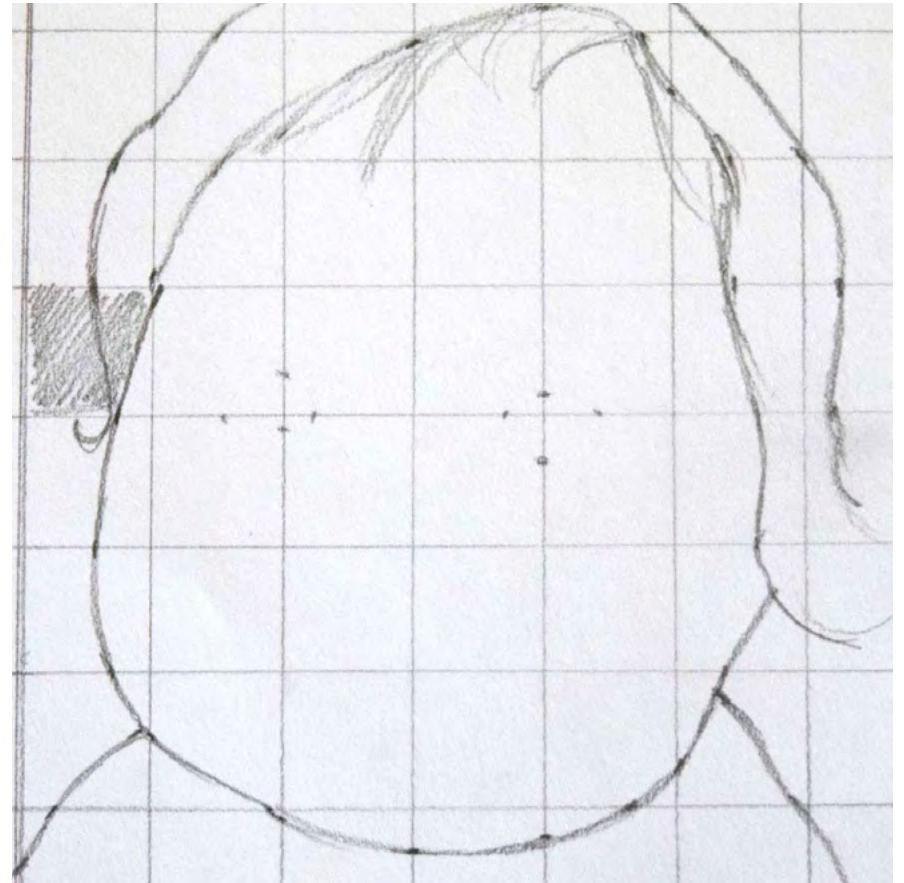
How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



Large shapes done
and we're about to move on
to the details (I am using a
sketchbook for demonstration
purposes, usually it would be
a piece of watercolor paper).

It looks like I forgot
to connect the dots on the
photo - and I did. This is an
optional step in the process and
I typically don't do it at all.
Once you get a hang of how the
grid method works, you will
likely not need to do it either.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



71

11. Now, the eyes.

With this grid, I am able to find four anchor points for each eye, which doesn't give me enough information to draw them well.

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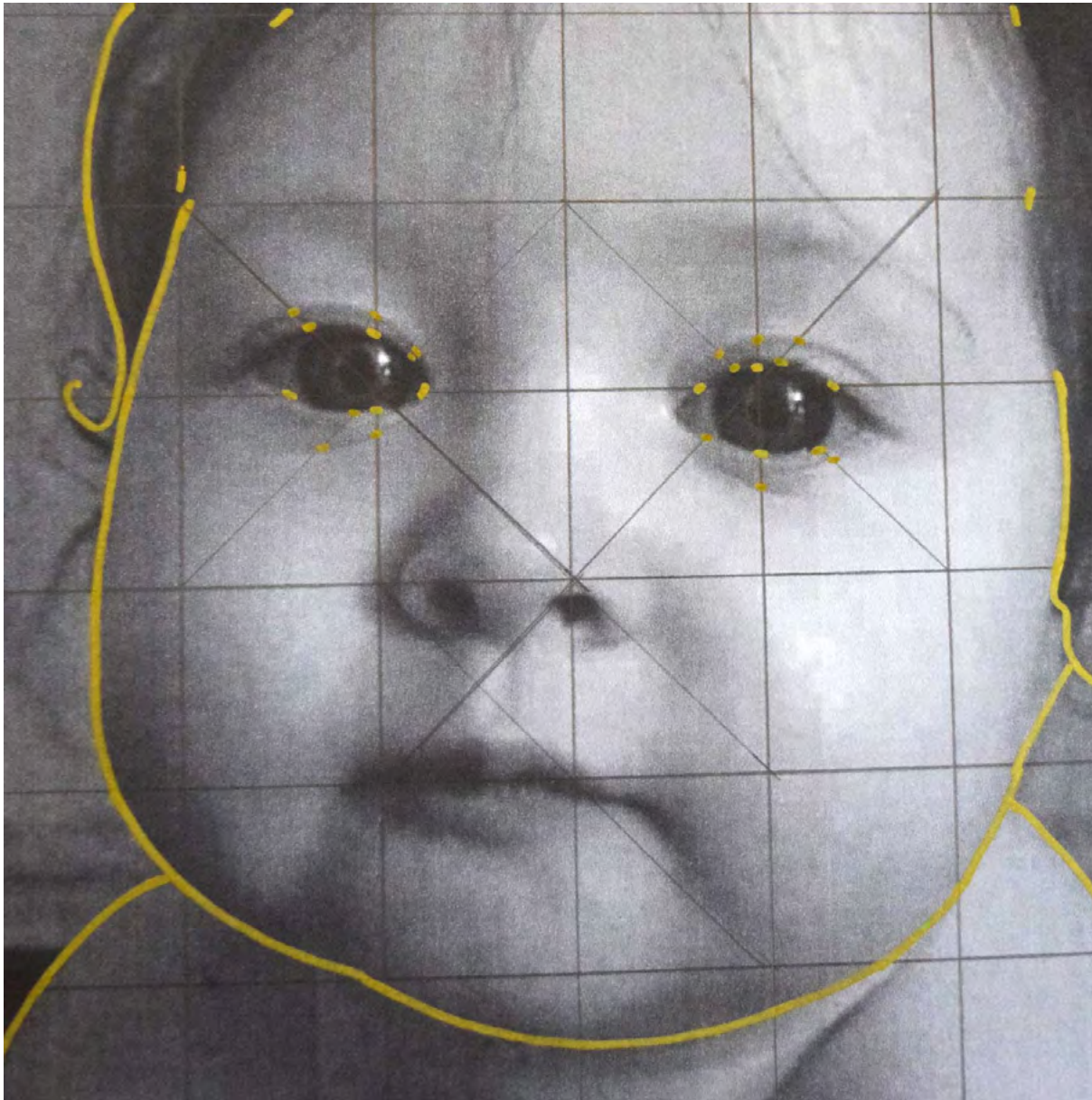
So I enhance the grid by adding diagonals in the areas where there is more detail (facial features in this case).



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I placed diagonals in the cells around her eyes, nose, and mouth.

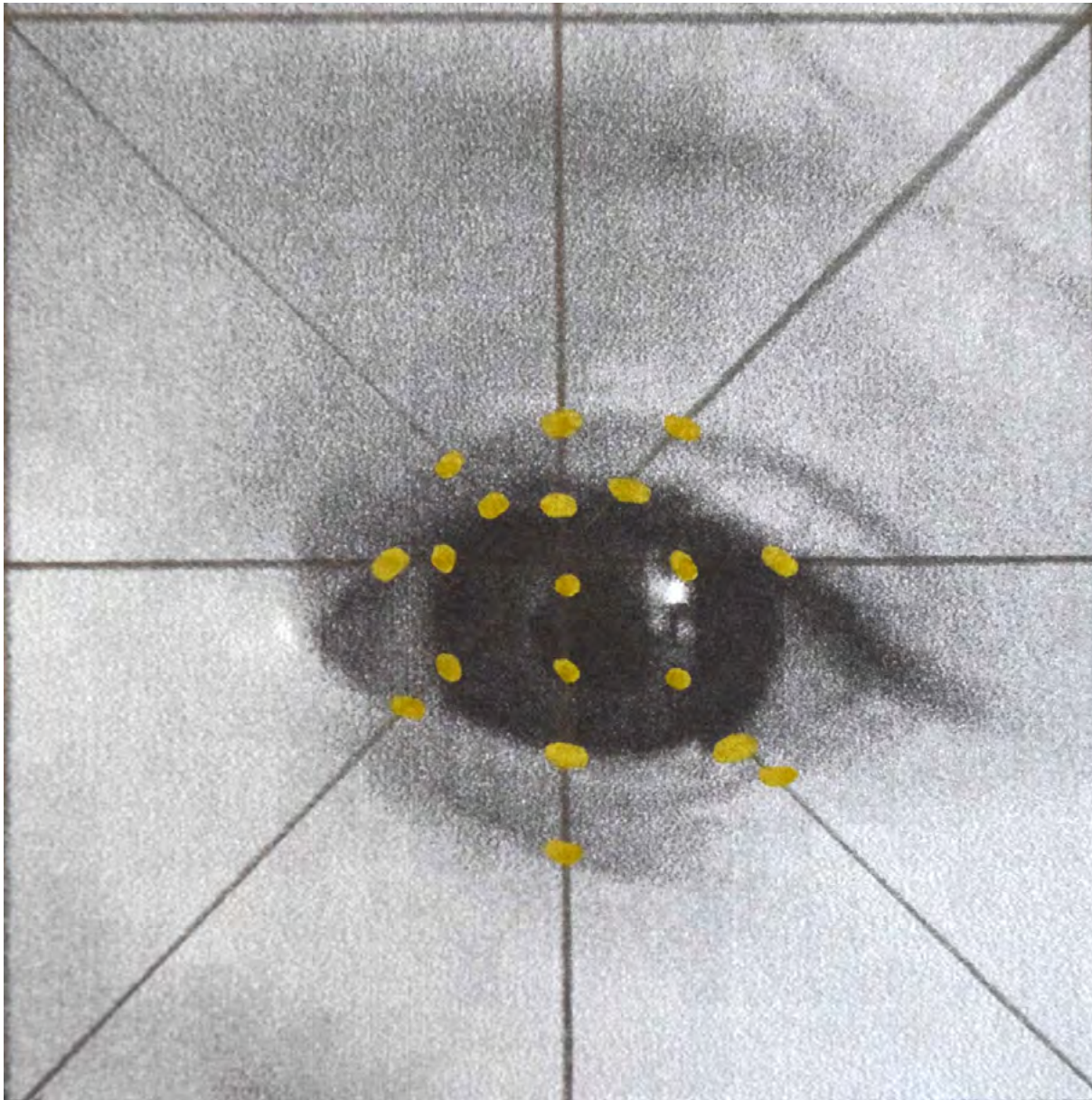
Now, I have a lot of additional points I can use to map out her eyes.



How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

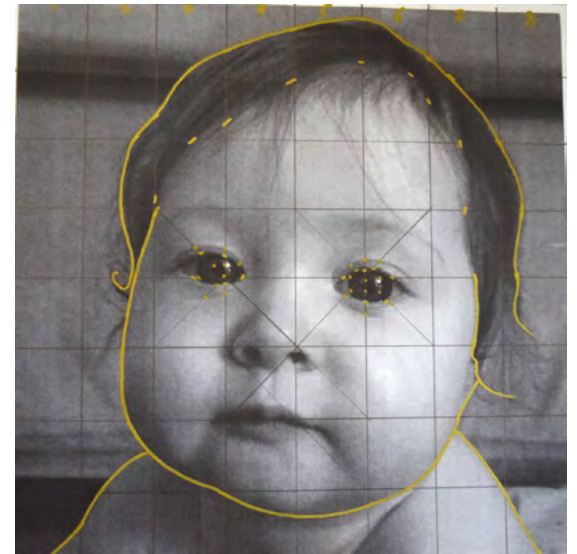
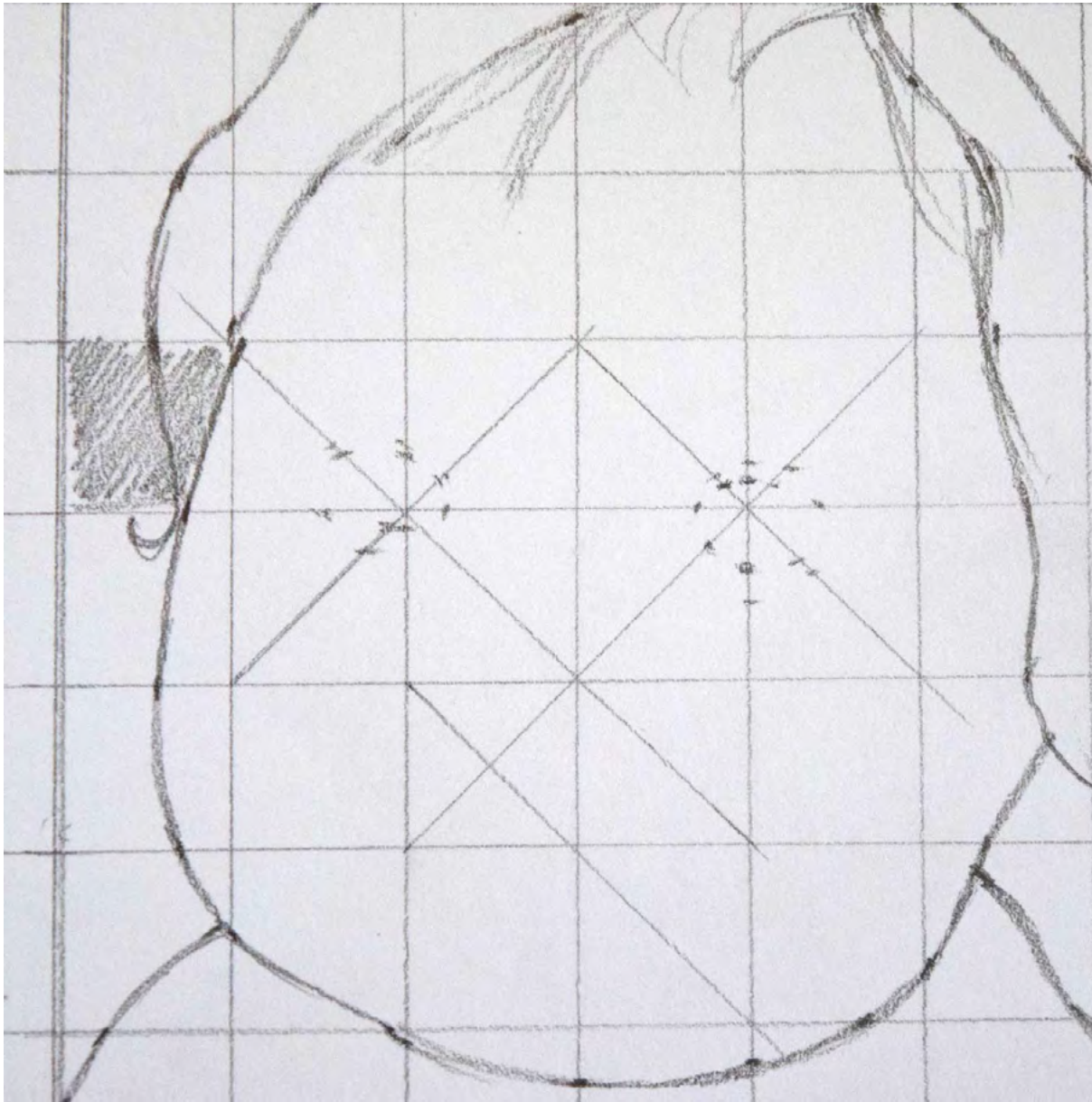
Here, I used both the grid and the additional diagonal lines to find anchor points for the outlines of the inside of the eye, the eyelids, the iris and the pupil.

You may also choose to make the grid smaller (every 1/2 of an inch instead of every inch, for example) throughout the image or just where you need more detail.

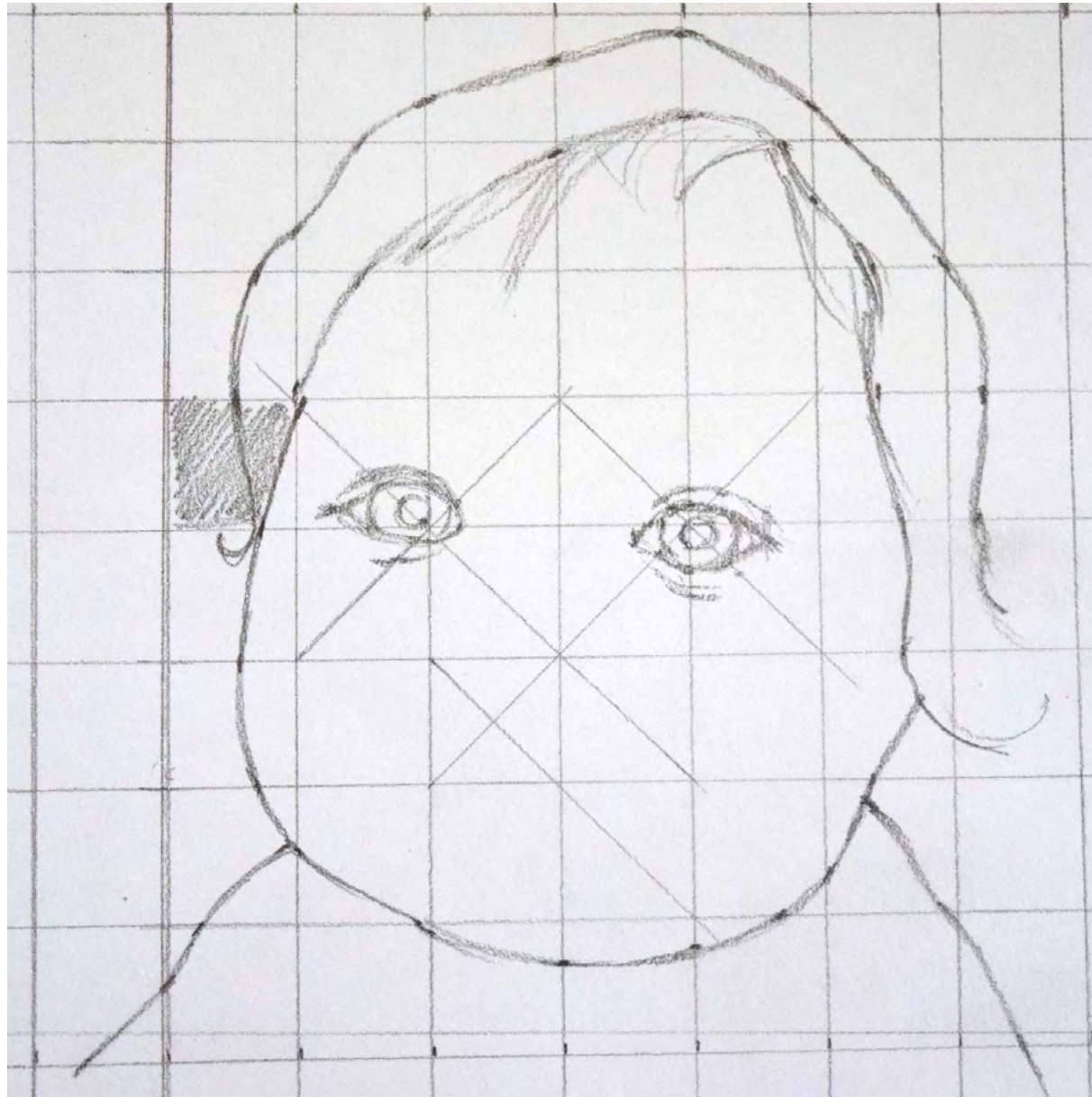


How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step

Transfer the anchor
points to the paper...

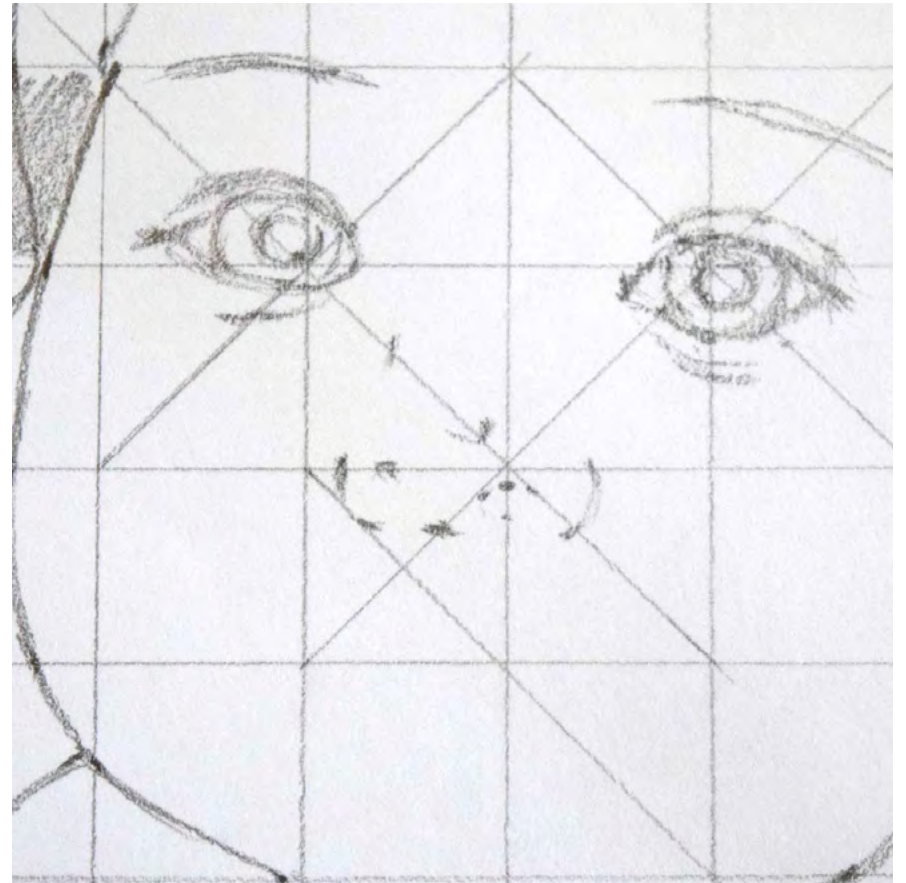
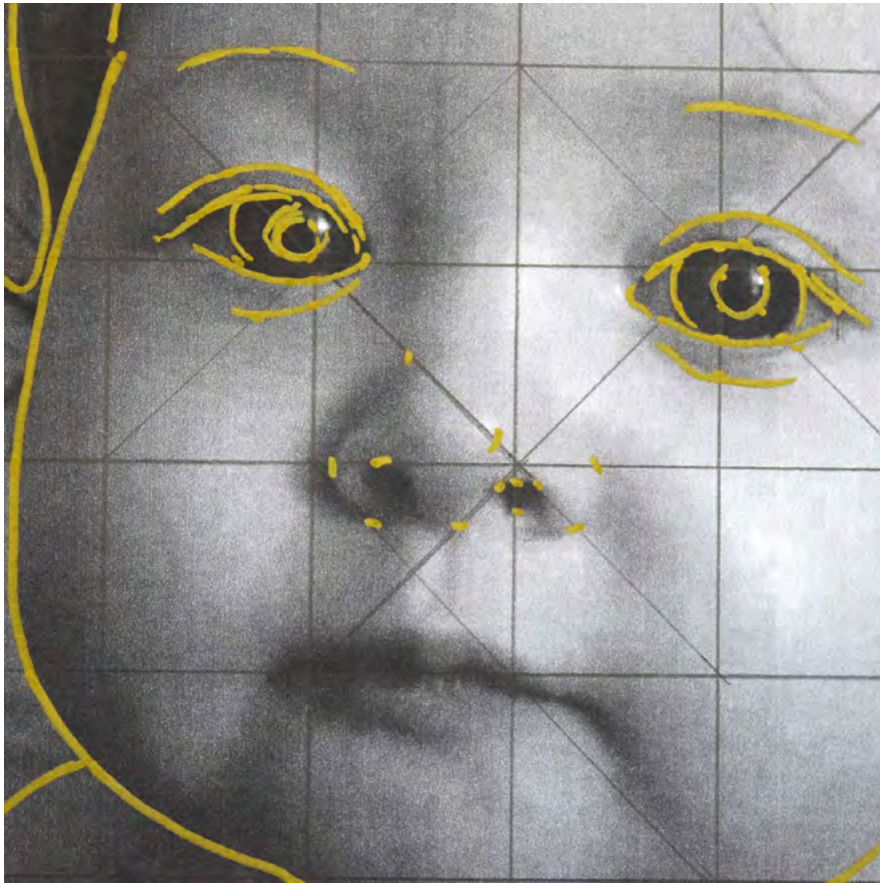


How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



...and connect them.

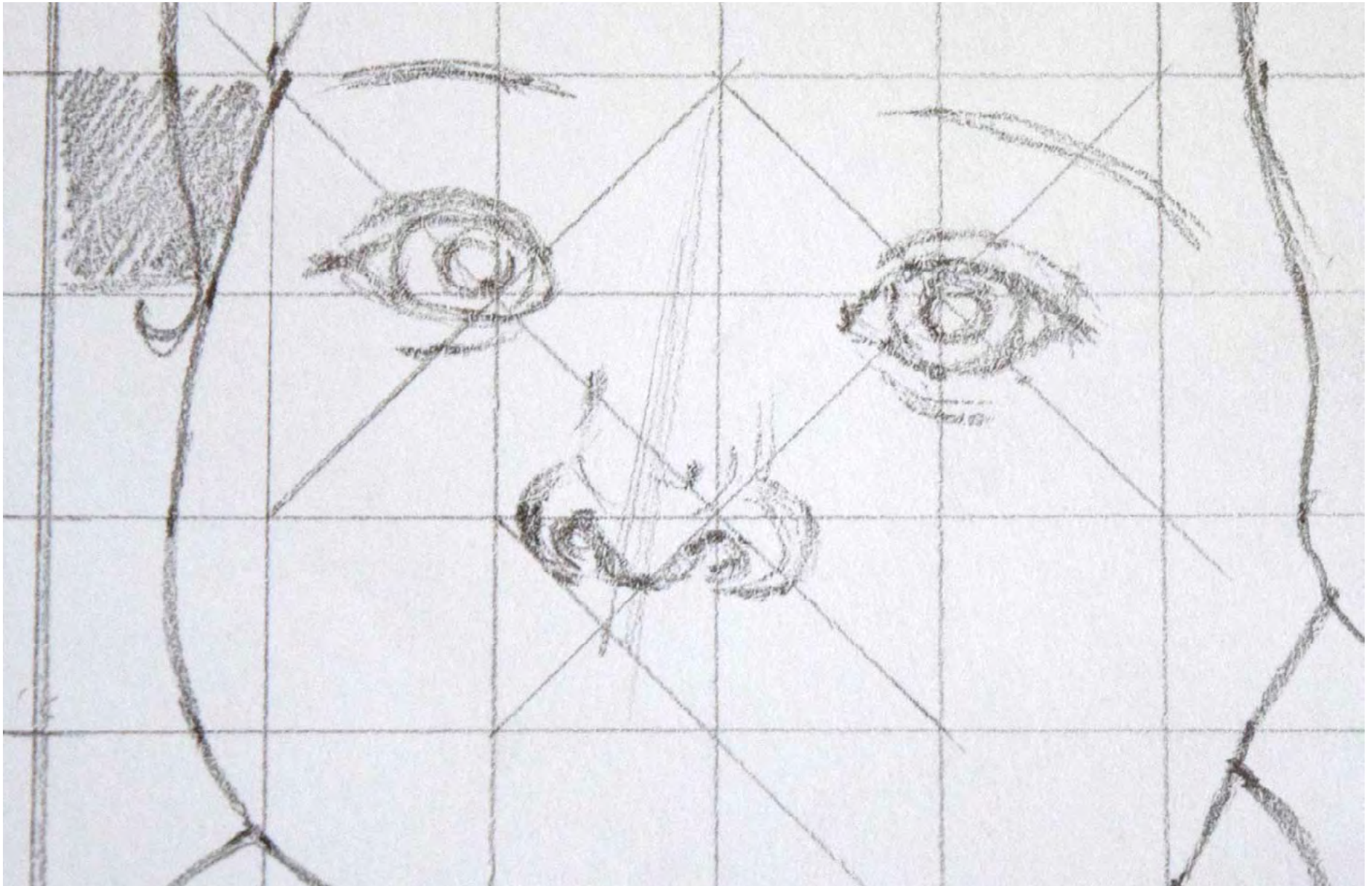
How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



77

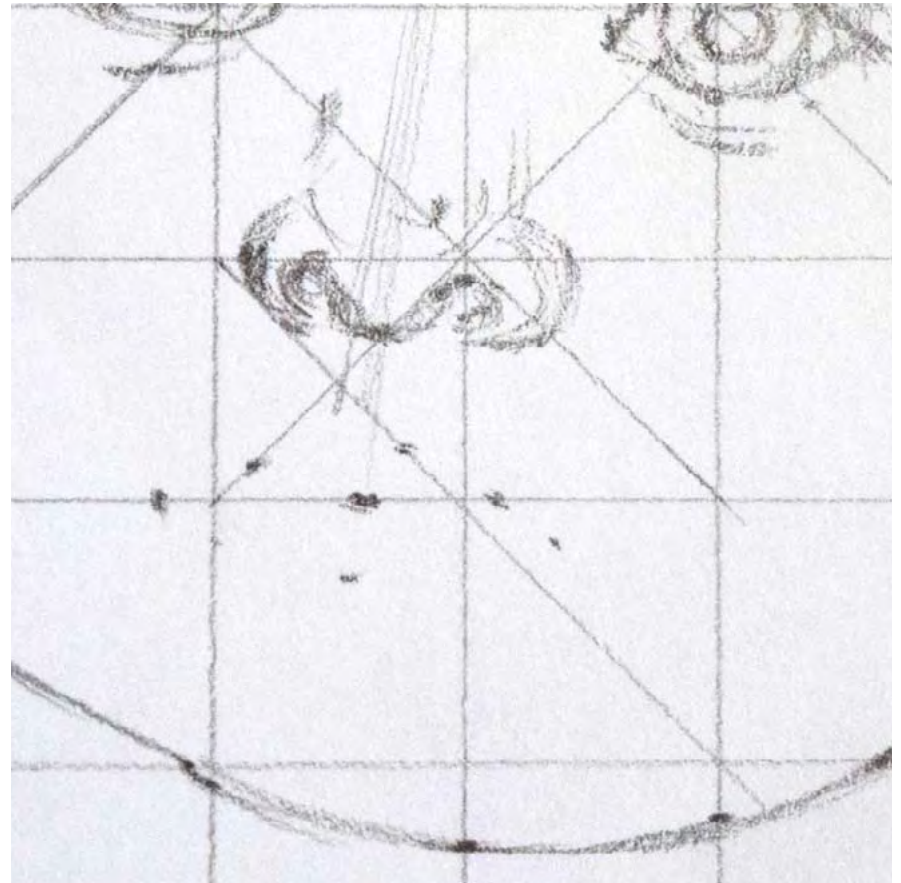
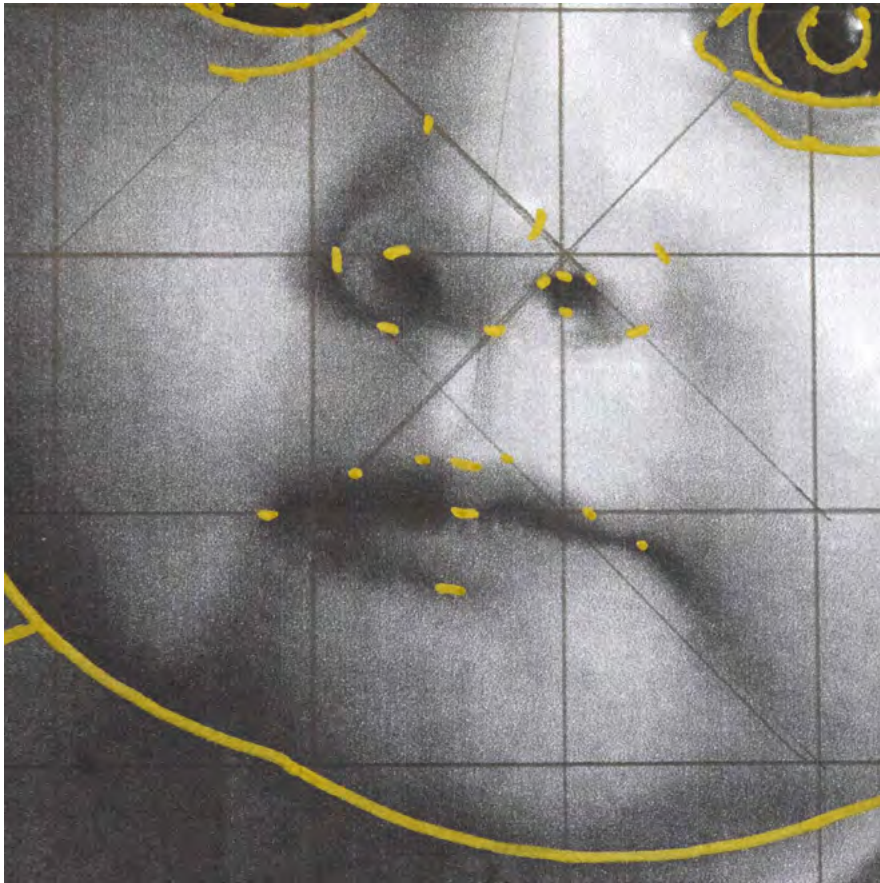
12. Repeat for the nose.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



78

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



79

13. Repeat for the lips.

How I Paint Children: 5 Watercolor Portraits Step by Step



And done!

Now, you can erase the grid and adjust anything that doesn't look quite right (because it will).

You may want to soften the lines with a kneaded eraser if you don't want them to show in the finished painting too much.

After this much work, you will be itching to start splashing the paint, so go ahead and splash!

Tips

- **Take it slow.**
- **Buy an artist anatomy book** (*Classic Human Anatomy* is a good book that I use often).
- **Learn the basic anatomy of the head** and proportions of the face and use it to check your drawing. Google those topics while you wait for your anatomy book to arrive. Watch *Proko* on YouTube.
- **Eyeball the placement of the anchor points on the grid, then double-check.** Is the point in the middle of the grid line? One third? One fourth? Is it almost in the corner? If your paper is the same size as the reference photo, you can even use a ruler to check the accuracy of your guess. It is important, however, to take that first guess, if you want to develop drawing accuracy. As you train your eye, you will become better and faster!