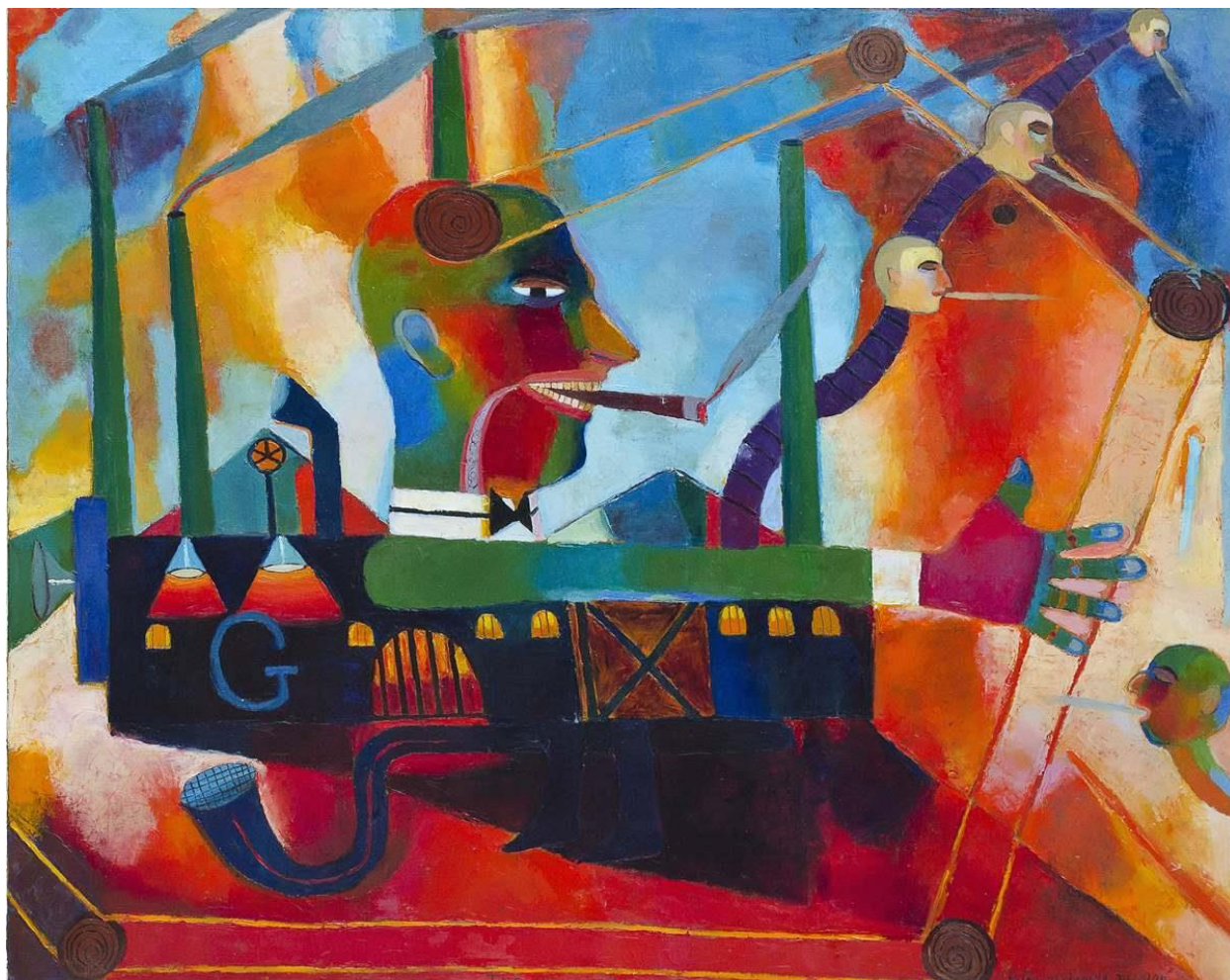


RAG

RICHMOND ART GALLERY
School Art Program



Teacher Guide

Peter Aspell: *The Mad Alchemist*
January 23, 2016 to April 3, 2016

Dear Teachers

This guide contains information about the exhibition, the artists, and some classroom activities that will help you to prepare your students for their visit to the Richmond Art Gallery. Please review this package with your students to get the most out of your gallery visit. The suggested activities require a minimum of materials and are adaptable to the needs of different grade levels.

Throughout the guide you will find art vocabulary words in bold that are defined in the vocabulary section, and resource links have been included for further topic explorations.

Program Goals

The goals of the gallery tour and art workshop are to encourage students to:

- Describe and respond to works of art and explore artists' intent
- Observe and share how artists use processes, materials, and techniques to express ideas
- Explore personal experience, community, and culture through art making
- Examine the relationship between art and the wider world
- Create artworks using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play



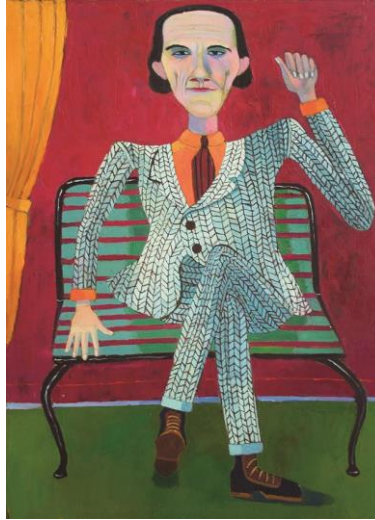
About the Exhibition

The exhibition *Peter Aspell: The Mad Alchemist* is the result of a partnership between the Richmond Art Gallery and The West Vancouver Museum, who also currently have an exhibition of the work of Peter Aspell, entitled [Peter Aspell: Saints and Sinners, Mystics and Madness](#).

These exhibitions were curated by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Director of the Richmond Art Gallery, and Darrin Morrison, Director/Curator of the West Vancouver Museum, and originated from a mutual passion for the work of Peter Aspell, and a belief that this overlooked artist deserved to be acknowledged for his contributions to the art of this region.

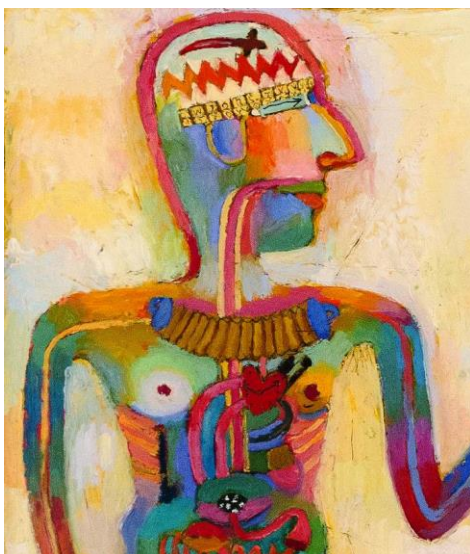


Vancouver painter Peter Aspell (1918 – 2004) is known for his extraordinary colour palette, his use of symbols and imagery, and his commentary on social, political, and environmental issues. He was among a core group of influential artists to gain early recognition in post-war Vancouver, and he exhibited regularly in commercial galleries in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and abroad. Unlike his contemporaries in Canada, whose work was primarily concerned with geometric abstraction, abstract expression, or the Canadian landscape, Aspell was interested in the figure, in symbols, and in emotion, and his portraits are filled with life and passion. These exhibitions include a selection of work from the 1980s to 2004, and represent the joys and despair of the human condition that Aspell explored through his art.



Portraits

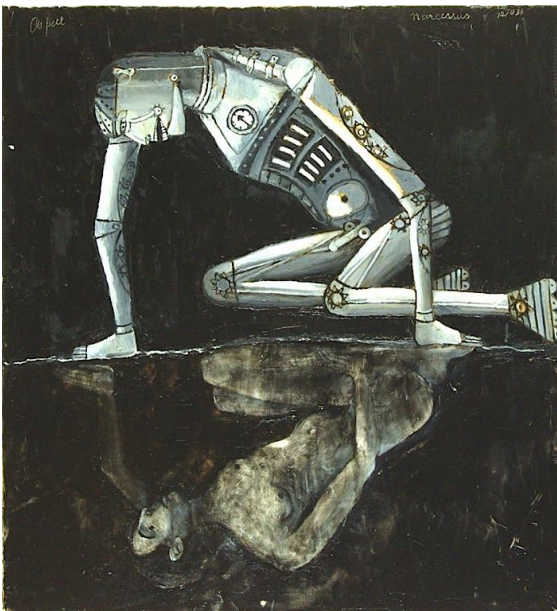
Peter Aspell's portrait paintings are not meant to be true likenesses of a specific person, and are deliberately not painted realistically. Some portraits are of people the artist knew, like the works Aspell described as "memory portraits" drawn from his recollections and mental impressions. But the majority of the portraits explore figures who are either on the periphery of society, such as *The Little Clown* (shown above left), or figures in positions of powers and authority, such as *Knight from Montoussé* (shown above right), *The Pharoah*, *The Industrialist* (shown on the cover of this guide) and others such as popes, generals, and dictators. Aspell uses **symbolism** in these portraits, such as the cigar clenched in the industrialist's mouth

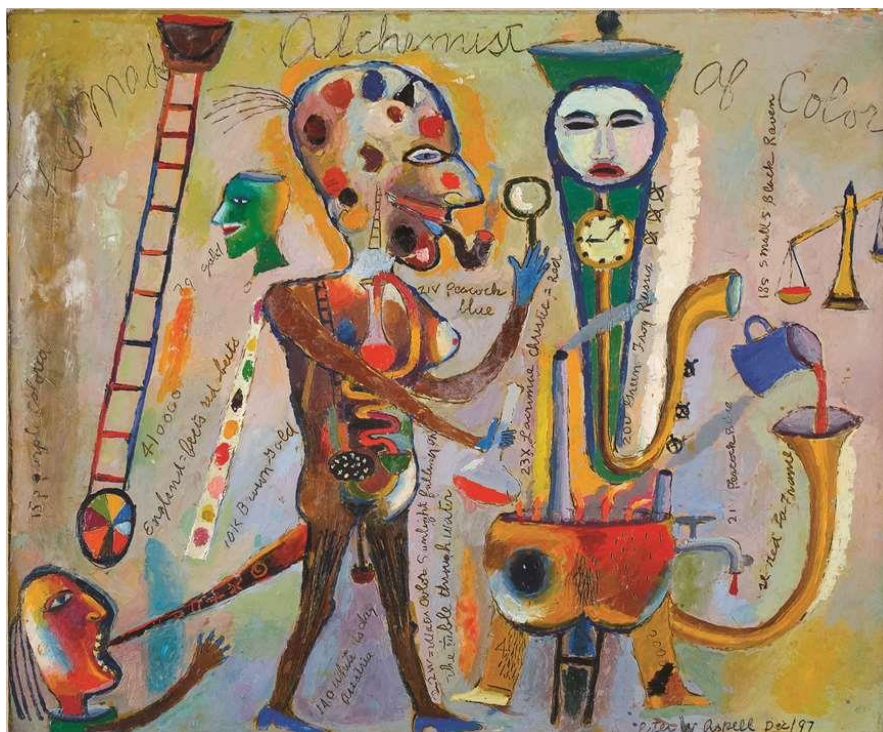


spewing smoke, representing factory smokestacks and the pollution created by industry. Later works from his X-ray series expose the inner workings of these figures by showing the skeleton and the internal organs, and again use **symbolism** to express insights into the emotional and spiritual side of humanity. As a part of this exploration into the human condition, many of Aspell's paintings incorporate machinery and depict human-robot hybrid figures suggesting that in our pursuit of technology humans are sacrificing our humanity.

Influences

Peter Aspell was influenced by a wide variety of art sources, from the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux, to art from Egypt, India, and First Nations of the Pacific Northwest. He was particularly drawn to African art, and was an avid collector who was very knowledgeable about the meaning and symbolism behind the different figures portrayed. Figures in Aspell's paintings often have facial features derived from [African masks](#), or a two dimensional flatness reminiscent of [Ancient Egyptian art](#). In addition, Aspell drew from sources such as Greek mythology and ancient history as seen in paintings such as *Narcissus* and *Cleopatra*. The influence of European artists such as [Diego Velázquez](#), [Paul Klee](#), [Goya](#) and [Carravaggio](#), can be seen in Aspell's work, and in some paintings he directly references a specific painting by one of these artists by recreating the pose or subject, and then making it his own. *Narcissus* (shown below at left) references the painting by Caravaggio (shown below at right). In this painting, he has recreated the composition of the youth Narcissus who is transfixed by his own reflection, but in Aspell's version, it is a robot transfixed by a human reflection, expressing the anxiety the artist felt over the increasing dehumanization of contemporary life, and the devaluation of the human soul. His knowledge and interest in the art of different culture and time periods was considerable, and he freely embraced and transformed these sources in his work to create something new and personal.





Use of colour and texture

Texture and colour play a big role in Aspell's work. The surface of Aspell's paintings are heavily caked in layers of a dozen or more colours, which the artist would apply thickly with a palette knife like he was spreading icing on a cake. Texture was created by scratching through the thick layers of paint with sticks and his fingers, creating dynamic lines and revealing the layers beneath. Through the use of transparent gel mediums he was able to apply successive layers of paint that radiated the colours underneath, creating golds, blacks, turquoises, and reds that appear to throb with an inner light shining through them. So great was his love of paint that the act of painting itself became a subject of his work, as in *The Mad Alchemist of Color* (seen above).

"I love paint ... it's a wonderful thing, I can walk barefoot through paint, feeling it all squish between my toes. Pigment is a joy, after all, it is the most wonderful clay. The magic of this clay ... when you squeeze it on to the canvas and your knife goes over it and over it there is a feeling of terrible happiness from that." (Peter Aspell, 1986)

About the Artist

Peter Aspell (1918-2004) was born in North Vancouver and studied at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr University of Art + Design). He later studied at the Academie de Ghent, Belgium, and taught at the Vancouver School of Art and the University of British Columbia before opening his own art school. He lived in Richmond, BC for ten years before moving to Pender Island.

Post-war artists including Peter Aspell built the foundation for modern art in Vancouver by challenging the conventions of their predecessors and exploring new territory. Aspell continued to work until his death, in later years producing some of his most ambitious work, including the monumental and apocalyptic *March of the Machines*.

A virtuoso colourist, Aspell honed a distinct palette using oil paint applied with knives and brushes, then scraped and scratched with sticks. He developed a vocabulary that included ominous flaming vessels, floating figures, African and West Coast masks and Egyptian motifs. He completed series of portraits of dictators, generals, popes, cardinals and dwarfs, followed by works depicting X-Ray imagery and humans intertwined with machines.

Before Your Visit

Discussion: Portraits

A **portrait** is an artwork that depicts a person or group of persons. Traditionally, artists were hired to create portraits to record what a person looks like, and often leaders such as pharaohs, queens, or emperors would have portraits made. These portraits could be very realistic, or be “idealized”, meaning they were created in such a way as to present a more flattering or attractive version of the person. These portraits often also incorporated **symbols** to communicate information to the viewer about qualities the person possessed, such as showing a lion to indicate bravery, or a cross to indicate piety and religious faith.

Today, portraits are seen as an expression of identity. Portraits no longer have to be very realistic in appearance, but instead can express how the person is feeling, or show aspects of their personality. An artist might show a person’s interests in a portrait by including favorite objects or showing the person engaged in one of their favorite activities. By using different colours, clothing, facial expressions, or decorative details an artist can portray a person in many different ways.

Show students a few different examples of portraits (see the resources section of this guide for some examples and sources). Questions to discuss with the class:

- Does the portrait look very realistic? Do you think this is what the person really looked like or is it idealized?
- How do you think the person in the portrait is feeling? How would you describe the expression on their face?
- Are there objects in the portrait that tell us something about the person? What about the location or background?
- How is the person posed? Is the person engaged in an activity? What clothes are they wearing? What does this tell us about them?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say with this portrait? Can you guess anything about the personality of the person they have portrayed?

In the workshop, students will be creating a self-portrait. But the goal of this portrait is not to express what they look like “realistically”, but to express something about themselves, an aspect of their personality, or something that is important to them. Have them write a few words to describe their personality and consider what they would like to communicate about themselves in their portrait. Then ask them to think about the clothing, facial expression, pose, and background they intend to include in their portrait to best communicate this information.

Questions to discuss with the class:

- How would you portray yourself in an artwork? Would you create an image of yourself as you really look, or would it be more about your personality, or more about your feelings today? Or would it be about how you wish you could be?
- What do you want people to know about you? How can you express that in an artwork?

After Your Visit

Activity: Reflections

Have students pair up or work in small groups where they trade portraits and discuss what information they get from their classmate's portrait from the clothing, pose, facial expression, colours, and additional objects and details. Have students reflect on what was successful in their portraits, and what details they could include to better express what they want people to know about them. If time permits, allow students to add elements to their portraits with markers to clarify or add to their "message".

Create a portrait gallery and ask each student to come up with a title that expresses what their self-portrait is about. Display the portraits with the titles and do a gallery walk so students can see each other's portraits.

Questions to discuss with the class:

- Do portraits have to look realistic to be successful?
- What do portraits express beyond just what a person looks like?
- Did you use colours to express something about yourself in your portrait?
- Did you show yourself as you are now, or how you wish to be?
- What feelings did you want to express in your portrait? How did you do this?
- What aspects of your personality did you express in your portrait? How did you do this?
- Did you incorporate clothing, objects or locations to help express your ideas?
- If you could do a portrait of someone else, who would you choose? What would you express about them?

Extension: Using visual symbols to communicate

Because artworks do not usually contain text, artists like Peter Aspell use symbols to tell stories or communicate messages. In other words, artists need to be able to use a "language" that its audience could understand, and that language is **visual symbols**. Visual symbols can be in the form of the colors chosen (e.g., white may represent purity or innocence in Western culture), or by the objects that are presented in the artwork (e.g., a lion may represent courage).

Introduce the concept of visual symbols to the class. As a class, look at symbols found on school ground (e.g., washrooms, exits) to activate prior knowledge. Come up with a visual list of symbols students see on a daily basis. If students are unfamiliar with symbols, present some symbols to students and have them guess what the visual signs represent (e.g., road symbol signs, motion picture rating system signs), paying attention to the text, imagery and colours used.

Looking at the portrait paintings as a class, discuss what symbols have been used. Did any students deliberately pick a colour to represent a feeling or mood? Did anyone use an object to represent an interest or idea, such as a soccer ball to indicate a love of sports or paintbrush to show a love of art? Are there any symbols that could be added to the portraits to help express their intended meanings?

Resources

Examples of Portraits to look at with students

[Portrait of Empress Cao](#), Song Dynasty

[Portrait of Napoleon](#), Jacques-Louis David

[Portrait of Adam Byrd](#) by Kehinde Wiley

[Portrait of Madame Charpentier](#) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

[Portrait of Carla](#) by Arthur Renwick

[Portrait of Pope Innocent X](#) by Diego Velazquez

[Portrait of Dr. Gachet](#) by Vincent Van Gogh

[Self-Portrait](#) by Frida Kahlo

Various [portraits](#) by Pablo Picasso

[Portraits](#) by Chuck Close

[Icon portraits](#) by Andy Warhol

[Untitled](#) by Yue Minjun

[National Portrait Gallery](#) in London, UK has thousands of portraits online from contemporary and historical artists.

Books

Bell, Julian. *Five Hundred Self-Portraits*. Phaidon, London, 2000.

Dickins, Rosie , & McCafferty, Jan. *Drawing Faces*. Usborne, 2009.

Estellon, Pascale. *Making Faces: A Portrait Activity Kit*. Seuil Publishing - c/o Chronicle Books, USA, 2004.

Roalf, Peggy. *Looking at Paintings: Self-Portraits*. Hyperion Books for Children, New York, 1993.

Glossary

Analogous Colours	A colour family containing the same hue, (e.g. blue, blue-green, and blue-violet) which are adjacent on the colour wheel.
Complementary Colours	Three sets of colours opposite each other on the colour wheel – red/green, yellow/purple, and orange/blue. When placed side by side, they produce a strong visual contrast.
Contemporary Art	Artwork that is produced in this current time, generally considered to be artworks made from 1970 to the present. Contemporary art is a very broad term, including artworks made in almost any medium and incorporating many different themes and ideas.
Contrast	Refers to the use of opposites near or beside one another such as light and dark or smooth and rough.
Figurative Art	Artwork that includes recognizable images from the real world, be it persons, places, or things, and in particular, figurative art focusses on the human figure.
Medium	The material or technique used by the artist to make an artwork. For example, paint is the medium used in a painting.
Monochromatic	A work of art that incorporates only one “base” colour, and uses tints, tones and shades of that colour by adding white, grey, and black to the base colour.
Portrait	A work of art that represents a specific person or a group of people. Portraits usually show what a person looks like as well as revealing something about the subject’s personality.
Symbol	A representation (picture, colour, design, or shape for example) that stands for something else.
Value	The relative lightness or darkness of a colour, related to the amount of light a colour reflects. Not all hues of the spectrum have the same value.

Upcoming Events at the Gallery

Illustrated Talk – *Raphael to Sargent: Exploring Portraiture Through the Ages*

Thursday, February 18 from 6:30-8:30pm

Discover how the art of portraiture has changed and how art historical portraits influenced Peter Aspell. Join us for an evening talk by the RAG's Curatorial Assistant, Dr. Hilary Letwin, on the history of portraiture from the Renaissance period up until the 20th century. Free admission

Family Sunday

Drop-in 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Free

Families are invited to participate in various exhibition-related art projects and activities on the fourth Sunday of each month. Stories, music, art...activities vary from month to month! It's free, thanks to the RBC Foundation.

2016 Dates: Feb 28 • Apr 24 • May 22 • June 26 • July 24 • Aug 28 • Sept 25 • Oct 23 • Nov 27

Aspell Conversation with Kevin Griffin and Rachel Rosenfield Lafo

Saturday, March 5 from 2-3pm

Join RAG Director and Curator of the Aspell exhibition Rachel Rosenfield Lafo and Kevin Griffin, arts writer and blogger for *The Vancouver Sun*, for a conversation about Peter Aspell's art. Free admission, everyone welcome to attend.

Spring Break Art Intensive – Children's Art Classes

Create a new artwork each day as you explore drawing, painting, printmaking and more! Using the Peter Aspell exhibition as inspiration, week one will focus on drawing and painting projects, week two will focus on mixed media and printmaking. Register early, as spaces are limited.

March 14 – 18

Ages 6-8 | 9:30 – 11:00am,
\$60/5 sessions | **Course #1286758**
Ages 9-12 | 1:00 – 3:00pm,
\$80/5 sessions | **Course #1286809**

March 21 – 24

Ages 6-8 | 9:30 – 11:00am,
\$48/4 sessions | **Course #1286808**
Ages 9-12 | 1:00 – 3:00pm,
\$64/4 sessions | **Course #1286810**

Bus Tour: *Peter Aspell at West Vancouver Museum*

Saturday, March 19 from 12-4pm

Visit two Aspell exhibitions in one day with curators Rachel Lafo and Darrin Morrison on guided tours of the Richmond Art Gallery and West Vancouver Museum. Tour starts at the Richmond Art Gallery, proceeds to the West Vancouver Museum, then returns to Richmond. Limited spaces, pre-registration required. \$20 per person. **Course #1286558.**

To register for *Children's Art Classes* or the *Aspell Bus Tour*, Quote the Course # to:
Online : www.richmond.ca | Phone: 604-276-4300 | In person: Richmond Cultural Centre

RAG School Program

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The Richmond Art Gallery School Art Program is one of many gallery programs made possible by the Richmond Art Gallery Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to extending the reach of our gallery exhibitions through community programming.



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We acknowledge the financial support of the Province of British Columbia

Image Credits

Cover: Peter Aspell, *The Industrialist*, 1998, oil on canvas

Page 3: Peter Aspell, *The Shuddering Blue Encloses*, 1997, oil on matboard

Page 4: Top (l to r) Peter Aspell, *The Little Clown*, 2003, oil on matboard, *The Man in the Herringbone Suit*, 2002, oil on canvas, *Knight from Montoussé*, 1998, oil on matboard, Bottom: *X-Ray for Dr. Von Cutter* (detail), 1998, oil on matboard

Page 5: Left: Peter Aspell, *Narcissus*, 2003, oil on canvas. Right: Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1597-1599, oil on canvas

Page 6: Peter Aspell, *The Mad Alchemist of Color*, 1997, oil on matboard