

About Face

Van Hart "On Art" Newsletter Issue 5 May 2009

Dear Friends,

Here's the 5th installation of my "On Art" newsletter. It's about portraits and why artists create them.

Hope you decide to give yourself a two minute 'art break' from whatever else you were doing. Happy reading!

Holly

About Face

Isn't it amazing how the combination of two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and some hair can uniquely distinguish the billions of us that live in this world from each other. Recently I've been painting faces of people that I know and people that I don't. Getting someone's likeness requires more precision than any other subject I've attempted. A single paint stroke near someone's mouth can make all the difference between capturing a likeness and not.

As most of you know, the artistic representation of a face (painting, photo, sculpture, etc) is called a portrait. In this newsletter, we'll look at three examples of great portraits, as well as a portrait of my own making, and the stories behind them.

Portrait #1: "Mona Lisa"



"Mona Lisa" by Leonardo da Vinci, 1503-1519

Most portraits are created because someone wants to immortalize a person they love or admire, and they commission an artist to create a portrait. In the case of "Mona Lisa", a wealthy merchant commissioned a portrait of his wife Lisa del Giocondo to celebrate their new home and the birth of their second son.

This painting did not become well known until 300 years after it was created, when it began to be associated with feminine mystique. Critic Walter Pater, in an 1867 essay on Leonardo, expressed this

view by describing the figure in the painting as a kind of mythic embodiment of eternal femininity, who is "older than the rocks among which she sits" and who "has been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave." Well, that would certainly explain why she looks so enigmatic.

Portrait #2: "Mademoiselle Pogany"



"Mademoiselle Pogany" by Constantin Brancusi, 1913

Constantin Brancusi, a Romanian sculptor, had a different reason for creating his portraits. Brancusi's objective was more of an artistic exploration. He aimed to use bronze and marble to push natural forms to their most basic, geometric shapes.

"Mademoiselle Pogany" (above) depicts a young Hungarian woman who met Brancusi while she was studying painting in Paris. Although her features are greatly simplified, the sculpture is said to convey the essence of her appearance. "What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things... it is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface," said Brancusi.

Brancusi's "essence of things" is highly valued. In February 2009, one of his sculptures set a historical record when it sold for \$37.2 million.

Portrait #3: "Addie Card, 12 years. Spinner"



"Addie Card, 12 years. Spinner." by Lewis Hine, c. 1907

Lewis Hine, an American sociologist and photographer, had another, completely different reason for creating portraits. Hine used them to drive social agendas.

As an example, in 1907, Hine became the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. For 10 years he documented child labor practices with portraits such as "Addie Card" (above) in an effort to help end the cruelties of child labor. When this photo was taken, Addie worked for 48 cents a day. She wasn't sure how old she was, but she knew she was too young to be allowed to work.

For decades, Hine continued his photographs in a similar vein, working for the Red Cross, Tennessee

Valley Authority, and the Works Progress Administration. I'm very thankful to Lewis Hine for investing his artistic abilities to help drive important changes in our society.

Portrait #4: "Dreaming"



"Dreaming" by Holly Van Hart

Humbly putting a portrait of my own making after the others . . . "Dreaming" is a portrait of my husband Ike as a child. Ike dreams big, which is one of the many things I love about him. He is also someone who gets things done, which is a perfect complement to being a dreamer.

This painting is based on a photo of Ike at age seven. When I saw the photo, with an atlas in front of him and a dreamy expression on his face, it seemed to capture the essence of him so well that I couldn't resist painting it.

Some local art happenings

Here's some news I'd like to share with you about local art happenings:

* On Monday May 11, I'll be giving a painting demonstration at the Fine Arts League of Cupertino. If you live locally, and would like to see the demo and enjoy the company of a group of friendly artists, please join us! [For details click here.](#)

* Three paintings from my Rodin series are now in the Menlo Park Library behind the circulation desk ("[Two Left Hands](#)", "[The Awakening](#)", and "[Jacques de Wissant](#)"). They will be there through June. This is a solo show, and it's part of a rotating exhibit sponsored by the Menlo Art League. If you're in the library please be sure to check them out.

Well, my friends, I hope you found this to be a refreshing 'art break'. Thanks so much for your interest!

All the best,
Holly

Related links: [Leonardo da Vinci](#), [Lewis Hine](#), [Constantin Brancusi](#), [Paintings by Holly Van Hart](#), [My Painting Blog](#)

Quote of the Day: "Portraiture has been the means by which the artist expresses the self in terms

of others.” Albert E. Elsen

Please feel free to forward this newsletter to friends and family members who may be interested.

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