

Portraits Link to Immortality: People Choose to Preserve Images of the Present

Artist Michelle Snead displayed an array of photographs of a female client so the woman could choose which images best represented her in the portrait she hired Snead to paint.

After considering the pictures for several minutes, the woman observed: “Surely I have bigger breasts than that,” Snead recalled.

Vanity may be a big reason people want paintings of themselves – it’s what comes to mind in the case of state mental hospital director Patsy Christian, who is in trouble for commissioning an employee to paint a large oil portrait of her – but it’s a tradition that lives on for even deeper longings.

“I suspect it’s partly done because of the illusion of immortality, and having something that extends beyond themselves,” said N.C. Museum of Art curator John Coffey. “Before photography, it was the only way one could perpetuate one’s image down through time.”

The art of portraiture dates to when pharaohs and kings were memorialized by their subjects. As the Renaissance era placed more emphasis on the individual, more portraits were made of people other than the wealthy elite. (Think of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa.)

In the 19th century, almost all of the art produced in North Carolina was portraits, according to Coffey. “North Carolina was a relatively poor state and art was not high on anybody’s list,” he said. “But when people did spend money, they tended to spend it on portraits.”

Even in this age of digital cameras, portraiture remains an important way for families to capture a moment in time. Portraits of children are the most common.

“Parents realize that time passes so quickly and they’re not going to be able to remember it,” said Snead, who has been painting portraits for more than 20 years. “They want to remember that time before their kids start maturing.”

