

In digital age, portraiture has **A TIMELESS QUALITY**



Portrait artist Michelle Snead enjoys getting to know her subject Ashley Zucker.

By Katherine Kopp

The art of portraiture is a noble tradition, with the earliest representation of identifiable individuals in works of art dating back to Egypt in approximately 3100 B.C. The artistic imagery of nobility and other renowned figures continued through the ages, flourishing in sculpture in ancient Greece and Rome, and on canvas and panel in portraits during the Renaissance in western Europe.

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Today, the commissioning of a portrait remains a significant practice for families seeking to capture a moment in time in the life of a couple, spouse or children, as well as corporations, firms and governmental agencies honoring a leader.

Michelle Snead knows a lot about that tradition. She has been painting portraits in Raleigh for more than 20 years, amassing a portfolio of several hundred works. Among her clients are former judge Franklin Dupree, Dr. Reggie Harris, former chairman of the board of directors at Medical Mutual Insurance Company, Ed Upchurch of Duke Raleigh Hospital and Wake County commissioner Tony Gurley. Plenty of parents are also eager to capture a special moment in the life of their children.

"A majority of (my) portraits are of children," says Snead.

Clients usually approach Snead after discovering her Web site or upon hearing about her from Portraits South, a national firm that represents artists.

Snead, who works out of her home-based studio, says she likes to spend time with the subject - learning about him or her and becoming familiar with his personality. After photographing the subject, Snead prepares a "study," a miniature version of the portrait that the client approves. The life-size portrait is mostly done from photographs but with children, studio sittings are often necessary.

WORKS OF ART

Between the subject commissioning the work and the portrait being completed can take eight to 10 months. Currently, Snead says she has about 10 pieces in the works. She says portraiture remains a thriving Southern tradition, pointing out that universities have line items in their budget for portrait expenses.

"People see a distinction between photogra-

phy...and something that is truly painted from scratch," says Snead.

Companies such as Portraits South play a crucial role in the process - helping connect clients from across the country with the best suited artist.

"We are seeing great demand from clients who want to commission a portrait," says Jean Daniel, president of national sales for Portraits South in Raleigh (www.portraitsouth.com). "2006 was an incredible year, and this year we've continued to be very busy," she says. Portraits South, which represents almost 100 artists from all over the country, has commissioned more than 7,000 portraits since its founding in 1977. The

Portrait Society of America, a trade association, says it has 43 North Carolina members, including 10 in the Triangle.

Portraits South represents artists who work in oil, watercolor, pastel, charcoal and pencil, as well as terra cotta and bronze. Clients work with an associate who can help them select an artist whose style and fees are the best fit for a client's taste and budget. Portraits South artists generally work from photographs, which the artist personally takes during an initial visit with the subject. Most portraits take from six to 18 months to complete, Daniel says, "but it depends on the artist's schedule, working style and how many portraits he or she may already have been commissioned to do."

Fees for Portraits South's artists range from \$1,500 for a pastel drawing of the subject's head and shoulders to more than \$100,000 for a portrait painted in oils, Daniel says.

CAPTURING THE CHARACTER

Snead says her portraits cost anywhere from \$1,800 to \$12,000, depending on the number of subjects and the complexity of the work. A full-length portrait of a child - about 30 inches by 40 inches in size - can cost \$5,000, she says.

Nicholas Read, an artist based in Cambridge, Mass., has painted portraits in oil for 30 years (www.nicholasreadpainter.com). Read says that each portrait is unique and that it is difficult to estimate the time needed to complete a work. "It can take a short time or an excruciatingly long time," he says. "Every sitter is different. Also, since this is a painting, so there are composition problems to



Most artists paint from photographs, but sometimes they request subjects come in for sittings.

be worked out. Sometimes, that will take a couple of days and sometimes it will take months. That said, I would say that the average time needed [for me] to complete a portrait is about 40 or 60 hours."

Read usually paints from photographs, using an initial meeting to "spend 30 minutes to an hour with the sitter, talking about the composition, what the sitter would like, clothing and taking the pictures. This gives me a chance to form an impression of the subject, which helps give the painting a direction," he says.

Like many artists, Read uses photographs as a point of reference, not as an image to copy, he says. "The photographs are like topographic maps, with the lighting exaggerated to clearly define the form." He recommends that a subject's clothing be kept simple. "Stripes and patterns are distracting," he says, "but if there is a special reason to include such items, such as wearing a tie that is a sentimental favorite, the subject should do so."

Read always includes his subject's hands in his works. "All my portraits are with hands included," he says. "The hands are very expressive and present a great opportunity to make the painting more interesting."

AN IMAGE FOREVER

Fees for Read's portraits range from \$3,000 for an individual work to \$5,000 for double portraits, such as a couple or two children. He occasionally does portraits of companion animals and charges \$1,000 for those.

Read enjoys the challenge of capturing the essence of his subjects. He says of portraits, "It is not you seeing yourself through a thing, like a mirror or a camera, but it is another person looking at you. When you look at someone you know - your husband, children, yourself - you do not see the person in front of you, but ... that person is infused with the person of the past as well as the present. You may see your child as he or she is today, but also as a baby, a toddler, a 16 year-old," he says.

"As a painter, I do not see what you see. Some day you will see the person I painted, but not now. Your vision has to catch up with the painting. I have seen this happen again and again," Read says. "A portrait is a bit of a surprise, but it gets better over time."



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