

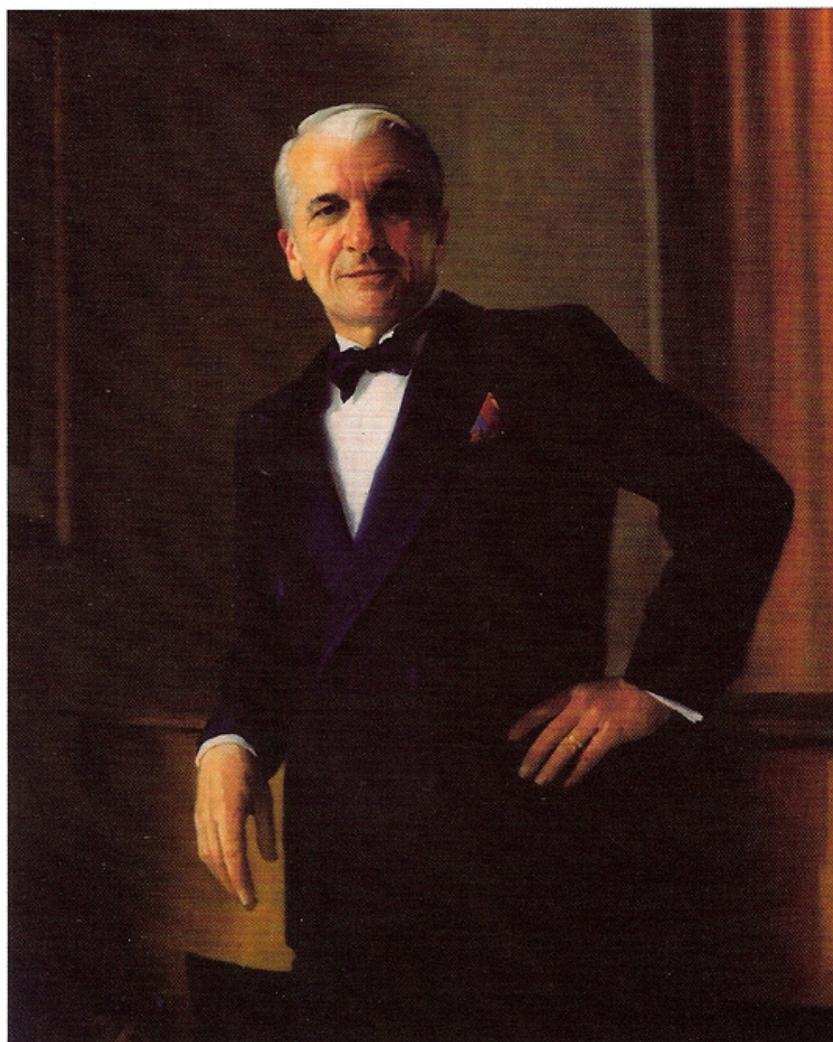
Face Value

How to put your best face forward when commissioning a portrait.

By Christopher Hann

Nancy Burke had a whopper of a secret. It was Christmas Day 1991, and she was gathering with all eight of her children in her home in Ketchum, Idaho. It might have been an idyllic tableau—the large family reunited in the Rockies for the holiday—had it not been for the absence of Burke's husband. Tom had died suddenly in March 1990, and 21 months later, his wife and their children, ages 7 to 23, were still trying to cope with the enormity of their loss. But Nancy Burke had an idea that she thought might help pull her family through.

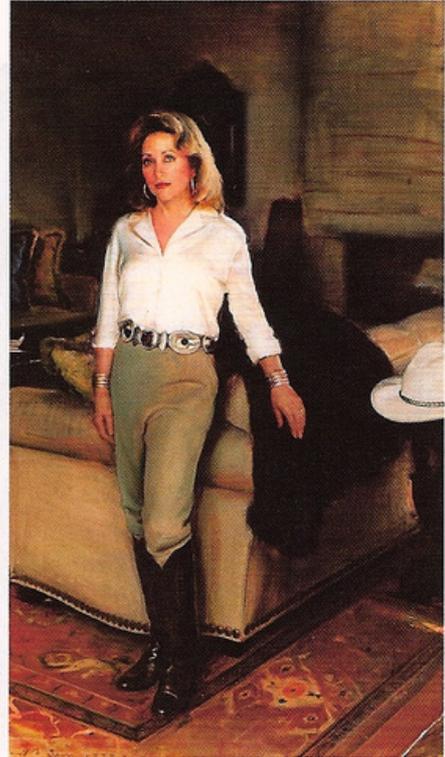
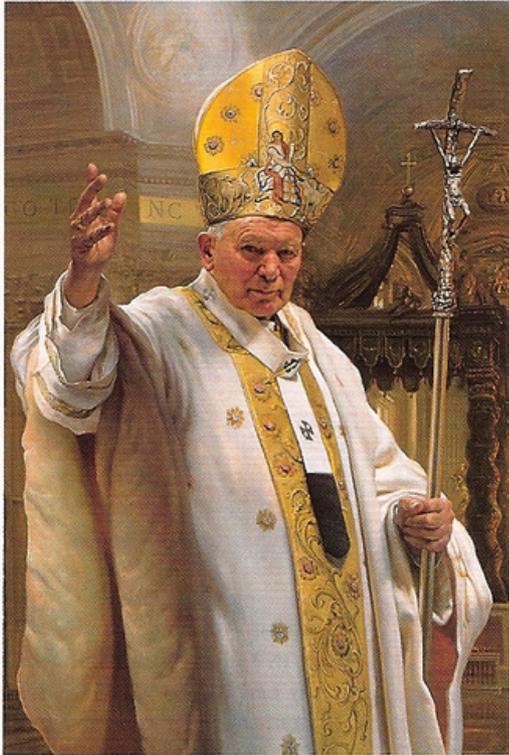
Three weeks earlier, Burke had met privately with Simmie Knox, a Maryland artist best known at the time for his official portrait of recently retired U.S. Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall. Knox had come to Ketchum to deliver to Burke a group of paintings that she had commissioned. He stayed in town for about a week, touching up each work as Burke suggested. And so on Christmas, Burke gave to her children a gift unlike any they had ever received: an original Simmie Knox oil painting depicting each one with their late father, in scenes taken from photographs that Burke had supplied



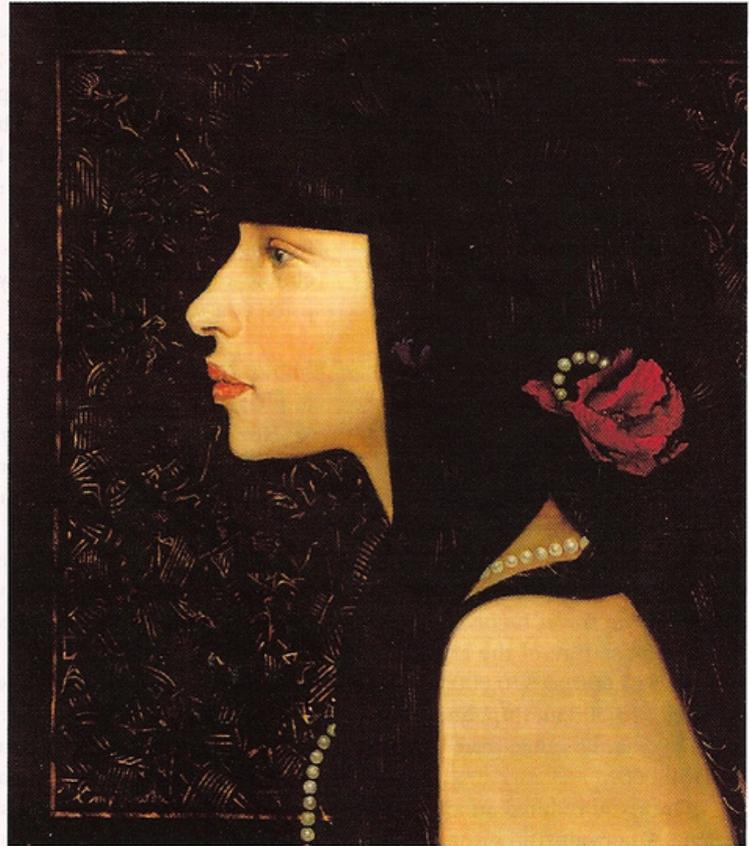
to the artist. "Oh, there were a lot of tears," she recalls. "I think everyone is happy to have them now."

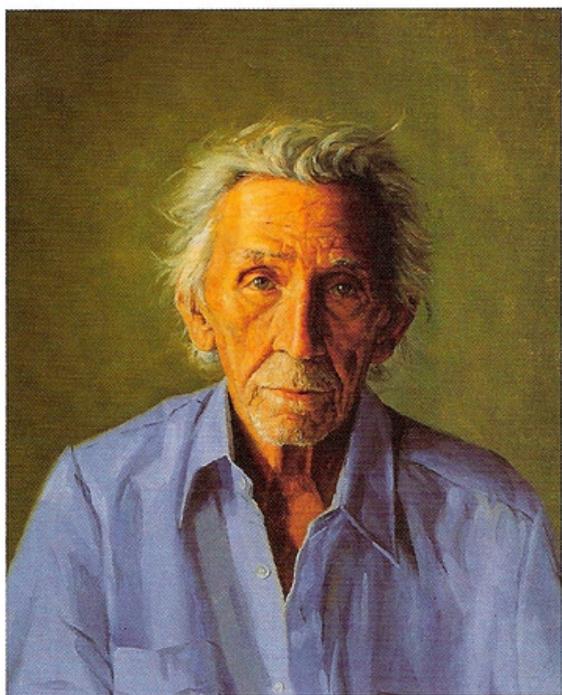
If commissioning a portrait is an act of conceit, as it's often said, it might also pass muster as an act of courage. Either way, it can be a daunting proposition, one best approached cautiously. When you hire an artist to preserve your image for posterity—and perhaps for all the world to see—you want to get it *right*. "A portrait is a successful painting," says Mikel Glass, a New Jersey fine artist who also accepts commissions, "when someone who's not connected to the sitter can look at it and say, 'Wow, that's interesting.'"

Simmie Knox, "Tom Burke," 1987, oil on linen, 44" x 56".



Clockwise from left:
Nelson Shanks,
"Portrait of His Holiness, John Paul II,"
2002, oil on canvas;
Ronald Sherr, "Portrait of Julianna,"
1997-98, oil on tempera on
canvas; Tatiana
Struchkova, "Girl with
Beads," 1998, oil on
canvas; Mikel Glass,
"The Reich Family,"
2002, oil on canvas.





Mikel Glass, "Abraham," 1998, oil on canvas.

As you begin your research, the first thing you'll notice is that each artist works in different ways, at different paces and for different prices. Knox, whose official portrait of President Bill Clinton was unveiled at a White House ceremony in June 2004, often relies on photographs, which Knox snaps himself. Nelson Shanks of Pennsylvania, perhaps America's premier portraitist—he's painted kings, queens, popes, presidents and divas—almost always has his subjects pose live. Fees depend on the scope and size of the painting, the number of people to be included, the travel involved and, of course, the stature of the artist. Glass charges \$15,000 to \$70,000; Knox receives \$18,500 and up; and portraits by Shanks range from \$50,000 to \$150,000.

Once you've hired an artist, be patient. A portraitist in great demand

might have a waiting list of 18 to 24 months. And even once paint has been applied to canvas, it

could take six months, sometimes longer, to complete the portrait. Shanks says he spent 600 to 700 hours painting the mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, a work that he considers among his finest. "Each painting has its own demands," he explains. Following are some tips on finding an artist who will best be able to capture the essential you at a price you can afford.

How to Find a Portrait Artist

- ◆ **Network.** If you know someone who's had his portrait painted—and you're impressed with the result—ask for the artist's name. Established portrait painters say they find many of their subjects through referrals and repeat customers.
- ◆ **Contact an artist whose work you admire.** Elizabeth Shea, a public relations representative in Alexandria, Virginia, was already familiar with Glass when she asked him to paint her portrait;

she and her husband, Dennis, owned two of his paintings. Shea initially had balked when Dennis suggested the portrait as a way to celebrate her 40th birthday. "The whole idea turned me off," she says. "I had this notion of women standing by fireplaces looking uptight." Although she eventually conceded, she did not pose near a fireplace and most certainly did not appear uptight. The result is an unusual work that today both artist and subject hold dear. (See *Art & Antiques*, Closer Look, September 2003, page 96.)

Burke, too, had history on her side when she commissioned Knox to paint her children's portraits. Four years earlier, Knox had painted portraits of her, her husband and her father-in-law, and she trusted his ability to, as she says, "go beyond the skin." She has since commissioned at least three more works by the artist. "He captures the soul of the person," she says.

If you like a particular figurative or portrait artist that you see at a gallery, ask the owner if the artist would consider a commissioned portrait. Insiders report



that many artists not known for commissioned portraits do paint them, but do not broadcast this fact.

- ◆ **Consult a gallery specializing in portraits.** Some galleries specialize in linking quality portraitists with clients. Tatiana Andreeva of Andreeva Portrait Commissions and Gallery in Santa Fe helps clients choose from the nearly 50 artists she represents. Among them are Ronald Sherr, who painted President George H. W. Bush for the National Portrait Gallery, and Sergey Pavlenko, who painted Queen Elizabeth II. "The commission always is a dialogue between the artist and client," Andreeva says.
- ◆ **Go online.** Among the more popular Web sites for finding portrait artists is A Stroke of Genius (www.portraitartist.com), which

offers links to some 140 artists, who pay a monthly fee to its designer, Cynthia Daniel of Palm Harbor, Florida. Although Daniel says the purpose of her site is to lead would-be subjects to portrait artists, she will occasionally play the role of agent. Recently, she came to the aid of the U.S. Coast Guard, which was seeking an artist to paint a formal portrait of Admiral Thomas H. Collins, the Coast Guard commandant. (She recommended Joy Thomas of Murray, Kentucky.)

- ◆ **Hire an agent.** If you're not sure how to approach an artist, let a portrait agent act as your broker. You won't pay any more for the painting, as the agent takes a cut of the artist's fee. A link on A Stroke of Genius' Web site will direct you to some of the country's top-rated agents.

Erin Cone, "The Winfrey Children," 2003, acrylic on canvas.

Getting Acquainted

Once they're hired, many artists will want to get to know you better. Glass, who describes himself as "a pathological people-pleaser," says he prefers to visit clients at their homes, where he'll conduct interviews, a process he likens to a first date. In addition, he asked Shea to write an essay detailing what she wanted to achieve with her portrait.

Knox follows a similar process, embarking on a dialogue with his subject (or subjects) that will help him create something more than a mere likeness. "When I make this portrait of you and your family, we're trying to tell a story, and I want to know how would you like to see that story told," Knox says. "At the end, I



Mikel Glass, "Elizabeth Shea," 2003, oil on canvas.

know what they want me to do and they know what I'm going to do. I don't believe in surprises."

Shanks takes a different approach, tending not to consult as much with subjects beforehand. ("Their input is usually minimal," he says.) Yet because he spends so much time with them—Margaret Thatcher sat for nearly 80 hours for her two Shanks portraits—they are able to see their portraits taking shape. The length of time he spends with his subjects has allowed Shanks to form lasting friendships with many of them. "It's a remarkable privilege to get to know them in the way that I do," he says.

The Setting

To determine the right setting for a portrait, Glass looks for the one place that best reveals the subject's true spirit. In Shea's case, that was a no-brainer: Glass would paint her in her bedroom. On her bed. With her two dogs. "I wanted it to be a sliver of a moment in my life. We knew from day one in this process that I would be in bed with my dogs," Shea says, laughing at the memory.

Glass then directed a professional photographer to shoot her in

a variety of poses. The 90-minute shoot produced dozens of digital images from which he worked. Eventually, he painted her in a combination of poses. And throughout the process, artist and subject spoke regularly by phone. The resulting realist portrait depicts Shea indulging a favorite pastime: stealing a nap. And although Shea says she couldn't bear to look at the painting at first, she soon fell in love with it. There's one more reason: Shea was several months pregnant at the time that she posed, so she now views her portrait as an unintended depiction of mother and daughter.

In the end, Shea says, a portrait subject must have faith in the chosen artist. "It all boils down to trust," she says. "Have them get to know you so they can bring to life on canvas something that people will look at and say, 'That's so ... her.' People look at this and say, 'That's so Elizabeth.'" ❖

Christopher Hann is a New Jersey-based journalist specializing in the visual arts.

For More Information

- ◆ **A Stroke of Genius**, Palm Harbor, Fla. (727) 738-1688. www.portraitartist.com.
- ◆ **American Society of Portrait Artists**, Montgomery, Ala. The largest portrait artist patron organization in the world. Lists agents, local chapters and resources. www.asopa.com or e-mail: info@asopa.com.
- ◆ **Andreeva Portrait Commissions and Gallery**, Santa Fe. (505) 982-7272. www.luxuryportraits.com.
- ◆ **Mikel Glass**, Tenafly, N.J. (201) 503-0130. www.mikelglass.com.
- ◆ **Nelson Shanks**, Andalusia, Pa. (215) 245-7780. www.nelsonshanks.com.
- ◆ **Portraits Inc.**, New York. (212) 258-2233. www.portraitsinc.com. In business since 1942 and represents 130 painters and sculptors.
- ◆ **Simmie Knox**, Silver Spring, Md. (301) 879-1655. www.simmieknox.com.