

In the Chair: Sitting for a Portrait

BY PETER TRIPPI



As *Fine Art Connoisseur* publisher Eric Rhoads notes often in his Publisher's Letter, an ideal way for collectors — indeed anyone — to show their support for contemporary artists is to commission a portrait of themselves, or perhaps a loved one. This has always made a great deal of sense to me, yet until last summer, I had never found an opportunity to sit for a painted portrait. I was curious to see what the experience was like, and luckily I mentioned this ambition to my friend Jeanine C. Jackson, who founded the Connecticut Society of Portrait Artists (CSOPA), and is now its president emerita.

Jackson is a person who gets things done, and so, last July 16, I sat for three hours at the Eastern Greenwich Civic Center in Old Greenwich. Observing me there were 15 members of CSOPA: Peter Layne Arguimbau, Betsy Ashton, Kelly Birkenruth, Carol Boynton, Grace DeVito, Susan Boone Durkee, Nanette Fluhr, Sonia Hale, Jeanine C. Jackson, Claudia

Post, Ed Salazar, Manu Saluja, Joseph Sundwall, Cindy Wagner, and Joyce Zeller. Most of these artists live in Connecticut, though a few had come from New Jersey, Massachusetts, and New York (including Betsy Ashton, who kindly drove me from and to Manhattan). All had registered in advance, and I learned later that a waiting list had been established in case someone dropped out from the list of 15 participants, an ideal number in view of our room's size. The session was observed by a dozen relatives, students, and colleagues of the artists, as well as a reporter from the *Greenwich Times*, who ran an upbeat article the following week.

For most professionally painted portraits, the sitter must be with the artist for multiple sittings of two to three hours' duration, not only to allow the likeness to take shape, but also for the pair to get to know each other — for the sitter's personality to make an impression. My session, therefore, was atypical, as everyone realized it would be a one-time affair. Thus



The participants relax after the portrait sitting. Seated (left to right): Manu Saluja, Claudia Post, Nancy Stember, Peter Trippi, Jeanine Jackson, Sonia Hale, Betsy Ashton. Standing: Ed Salazar, Grace DeVito, Kelly Birkenruth, Cindy Wagner, Nanette Fluhr, Joseph Sundwall, Carol Boynton, Peter Arguimbau, and Susan Durkee. Not pictured: Joyce Zeller and also CSOPA member Elaine Gaskell DeSpeolberch, who helped organize the event.

Portraits as They Appeared at the Sitting's Conclusion



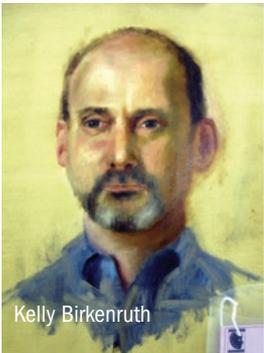
Peter Layne Arguimbau



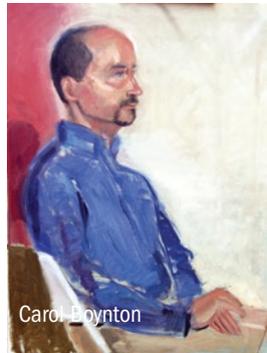
Betsy Ashton



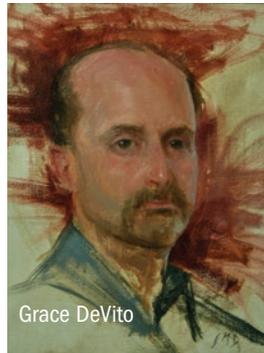
Peter Trippi and Claudia Post with her drawing



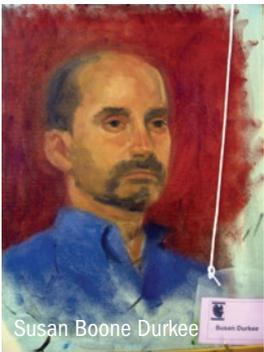
Kelly Birkenruth



Carol Boynton



Grace DeVito



Susan Boone Durkee



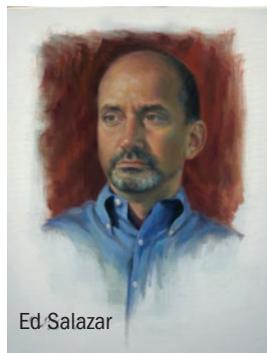
Nanette Fluhr



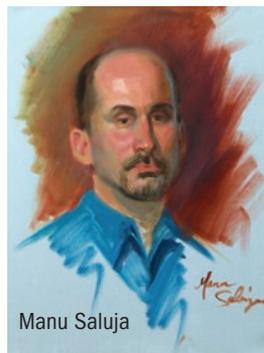
Sonia Hale



Jeanine C. Jackson



Ed Salazar



Manu Saluja



Joseph Sundwall



Cindy Wagner



Joyce Zeller

each artist arrived having planned his or her own line of attack; most painted me, though two decided to draw instead. Jackson says that “the artists each focused on accomplishing one or two things: character, likeness, color, value pattern, design. The picture is finished only when all those elements come together,” and, of course, that synthesis would have to occur after we had all said goodbye.

As instructed, I brought with me a range of clothes, and the group promptly decided that I should don a cornflower-blue shirt that would contrast well with the bright red fabric that had already been hung behind my chair. Since the room was not air-conditioned, I removed my suit jacket and changed from trousers into Bermuda shorts. (Fortunately, my exposed legs did not appear in any of the resulting works.) Claudia Post, who drew me in pastels, states that a “sitter should be told the basics of what is expected of him and given the opportunity to understand the process as much as possible, in order to be comfortable and at ease.” That did indeed happen, but I felt somewhat sorry for the artists, who did not have the ability to position themselves before me, as they normally would in their own studios. Instead, the group drew lots to determine who would stand where, and then I shifted my position in the chair until we all settled on one pose that worked as well as possible for most of us.

Lulled by the music emanating from a boombox, I maintained my pose for 30-minute stretches, then rested for 10 minutes while the artists (generally) carried on working. Although I am somewhat fidgety in daily life, the heat of summer and the lamp illuminating me, not to mention the room’s preoccupied hush, enabled me to “zone out” and remain fairly still; only a few times did the group have to raise the alarm when I lost my pose by inadvertently turning too far to the left or right after sneezing or scratching.

Claudia Post has also noted one of the key virtues of portrait painting: “Unlike a photograph that captures one expression with each click of the camera, the portrait artist captures each expression, thought, and nuance again and again, over and over until the painting or drawing truly becomes an honest portrayal.” These expressions, thoughts, and nuances emerge during the conversations between sitter and artist, of course. Alas, for the first time in living memory, I said hardly a word for three hours, nor did I change my expression. This, again, had to do with the session’s tight time constraints, and



The artists and their model at work

explains why the resulting pictures — though quite different in manner and gesture — all show me with the same distant gaze.

This sameness came into sharper focus for me after the session, when Susan Boone Durkee showed me a fine painting she had already made of me, based on the photograph that appears on page 20 of every *Fine Art Connoisseur*. It evokes, arguably, the real me, caught with hand-on-chin by my photographer friend Francis Hills during a long, chatty, and possibly boozy session in his studio. Francis's gift for capturing his sitters' inner sparks reminds me that not every photographer produces mere snapshots, and I think we all could agree that some untalented portrait painters miss their mark completely.

Fortunately, the 15 artists studying me at Greenwich were a talented bunch. During the wine-and-cheese-fueled show-and-tell that followed our session, I enjoyed seeing what they had created, and I have subsequently enjoyed receiving updates on how the paintings have progressed since. Sonia Hale wrote later, "I sought to find you in the paint: to find your likeness, your character and your mood. I paint the whole head at once and constantly step back to get the essential feeling of the painting — much like if you are at an airport and see someone approaching you, getting closer and closer."

From my perch on the podium, I was able to observe the artists working intently within the semicircle of easels. Hale was certainly not the only one approaching and backing away from her easel, though several stood absolutely still for 30 minutes at a stretch. As Jeanine C. Jackson noted, each artist approached the challenge distinctively, but all of them, she says, "want to do more of these sessions." CSOPA, therefore, is now seeking more volunteer models, and if Greenwich is geographically convenient to you, I highly recommend the experience. I also congratulate "my" 15 artists on their achievements, and I look forward to seeing what they turn to next. ■

Information: csopa.org

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.



Joyce Zeller draws Peter Trippi.