

To Be Both Engaging and Mysterious: Painting Portraits of Real People

By RICHARD STEWART HALSTEAD



Editor's Note: *The development of the previous article sparked lively conversations with talented figure painters across the country. This essay by a prominent Chicago portraitist offers a perspective on making a likeness that is not often heard in the general discourse. It was written by Mr. Halstead in collaboration with Dr. Julie Peyton Gordon, lecturer of English at Northwestern University.*

In the past 20 years or so, I have noticed a steady increase in the number of portraits being painted. Some of them put emphasis on bravura execution, some on scintillating color, still others on composition, mood, or a startling realism. There is one factor, however, that I find missing from most of these portraits: humanness. Although these artists might be creating art, few are creating real people with complete, multi-faceted personalities that make us want to meet them.

In the typical portrait painted today, the depiction of a specific person is almost incidental to the manner of execution. The reason for this is probably that most visual artists are more interested in their creative processes than they are in the subject portrayed. In defense of this attitude, they will say that a portrait should be a painting first and a portrait second. Yet this seems to limit the possibilities inherent to this fascinating sector of the visual arts. There are great portraits in which the painting takes precedence over the person, but there are also great paintings in which the process, although effective and even beautiful, is secondary to the sitter's presence, character, and life.

MORE PROSE THAN POETRY

In the latter kind of portraiture, the creation of an individual human being is the goal, and all other aspects are subservient to that final statement. With the emphasis placed this way, the results are more prose than poetry. The portrait might be accomplished with great poetic expression, but it is always, first, a biography or a novel.

How does an artist add this dimension of "humanness," this prose element, to the portrait? He contemplates the subject's manner, the sound of her voice, the way she moves, and how she relates to other people. He uses empathy and imagination to respond to her aura, viewing her in ways that are free of prejudices, the way an actor enters the world of a character to be portrayed.

A living person is multilayered, not just psychologically, but in manner, experience, and belief systems. Viewing this as an orchestrated whole is what creates a sense of spirit and genuineness in a portrait. But how is this accomplished when we know very little about the sitter? We rely on memory, not just of this person, but of all the people we have encountered in our lives who echo different, sometimes contrasting, aspects of this individual. Each person we study for a portrait is a collection of elements we have already witnessed, although never in quite the combination that we see before us. Even if the portrait we create is entirely imagined, it will be based on memory, because there is nothing

totally fabricated in the imagination. It draws from a vast mental warehouse, much of which is organized in disconnected fragments.

In commissions, however, an artist must base his imaginings on the perceptions of those who are familiar with the sitter. People who commission a portrait have their own priorities, whether they are based on love or admiration, and in paying what may be large sums, they trust that they will receive an image that reflects their interests. Respect, therefore, is essential to the unwritten contract that the artist must honor in commissioned work.

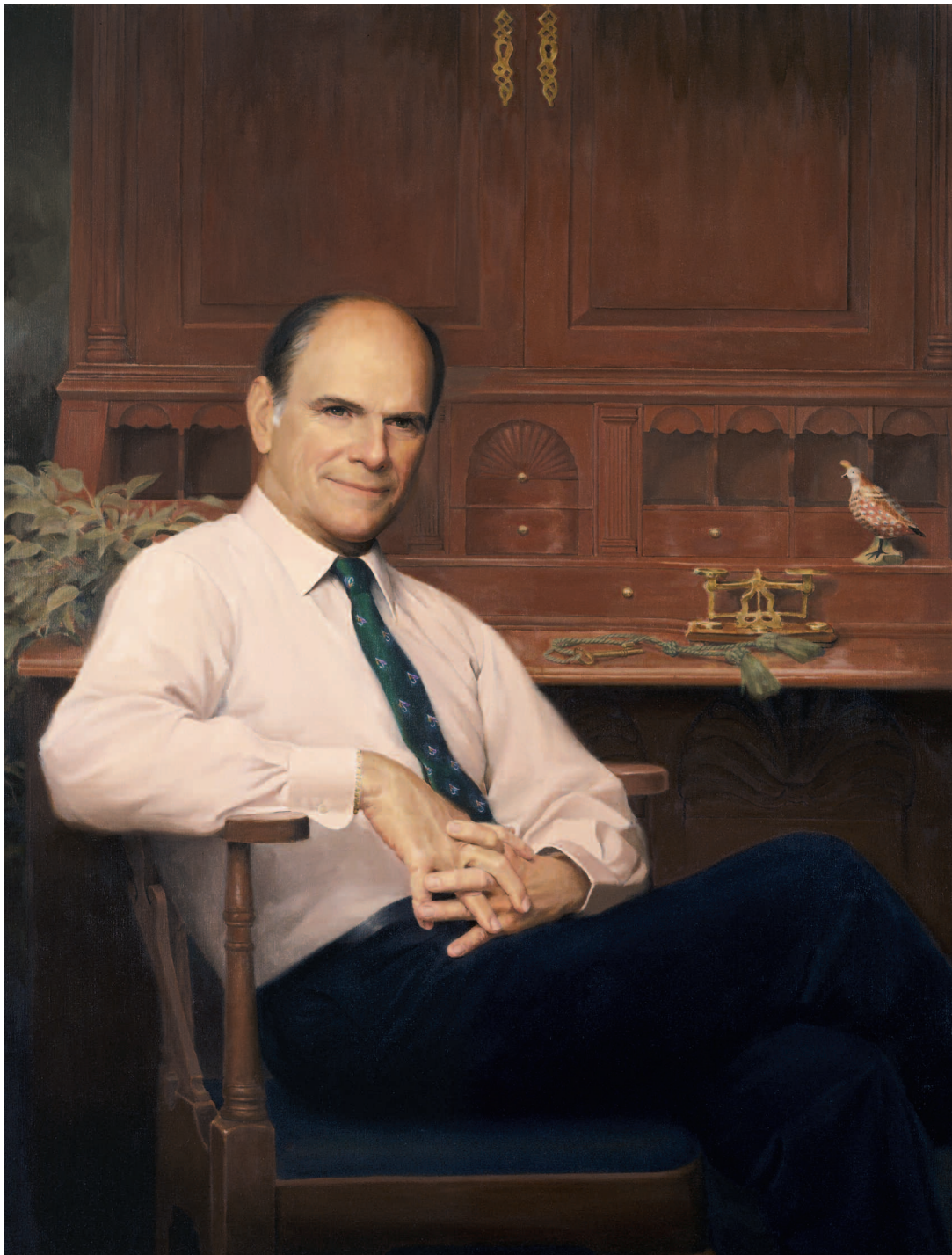
ASSUMPTIONS BEST AVOIDED

There are several common assumptions that may prevent artists from fulfilling this obligation. The notion of *penetrating the soul* is one of them. This phrase implies that an artist has a right to intrude on the minds of his subjects. There is a certain degree of psychology involved in portraying the character of a person, but that is not the same as the invasive methods of psychologists. Although the artist is expected to depict accurately an individual's persona, he is always most successful when he maintains a firm belief in the subject's rightful distance. Without this, he will not understand enough to attain that accuracy. It is presumptuous to think an artist can see the under-layers of a person without many years of acquaintance. Presumptuousness always leads to self-deception, which in turn distorts our perceptions of others. Each individual's mind is his home. A portraitist should not enter that home unless and until he is invited.

Another mistaken assumption is the supposed need to flatter the subject. It is necessary sometimes to alter or edit the shapes of a face while expressing the feeling of a person's presence, but when an artist focuses on improving a person's image, the result is generally the opposite. The individual's character and beauty become diluted and bland. Emphasizing the most positive in a person is not the same as flattery. It is, rather, doing what we are hired to do: commemorating the actual qualities for which this person is honored. Ideally the artist sees these qualities, instead of feeling he needs to bestow them.

ROLE MODELS

Of all the portraitists in history, the one whose work seems to me the quintessence of respect for his sitters and for their interior worlds is the Spaniard Diego Velázquez (1599-1660). Whether they were royals, servants, or entertainers, his subjects were painted through the eyes of a man who was both a diplomat and a humanist. Velázquez obviously understood human frailties, but he also had a sense of the innate dignity of an individual. In a *New York Times* article about the 2006 Velázquez exhibition at London's National Gallery, Michael Kimmelman described the master's approach as "ruthless." This is a trait critics sometimes apply to artistic geniuses of the past. In their assessment of portraits, it usually means that the artist has stripped away



RICHARD STEWART HALSTEAD (B. 1947)
MARSHALL FIELD V
2000, OIL ON LINEN, 46 x 36 IN.
COURTESY FIELD ENTERPRISES

all of the subject's artifices. I cannot think of anything less ruthless than the paintings of Velázquez. He did look beyond surface effects, but only to show us the greater worth of the people he painted. The only thing he stripped away was extraneous detail.

Our tastes change, as do the standards by which we judge each other, but universal truths remain consistent across history. If we see familiar qualities in a person who was painted centuries ago, it means the artist understood the essence of that person's humanness in a way still relevant to our times. Such is the case with the individual characterizations of Antonello da Messina; the soulful portraits of Rembrandt; Hans Memling's staid burghers; the intimate, almost voyeuristic portraits by Corneille de Lyon; Cecilia Beaux's figures exuding

both dignity and familiarity; and Gilbert Stuart's vital portrayals of our nation's early leaders.

Humanness breathes life into a portrait. We become convinced that the sitter is awake, aware of the world, and capable of recognizing us. We see her as fully human, with all the intricacies that implies, but being human, she does not reveal all aspects of herself. She is both engaging and mysterious.

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