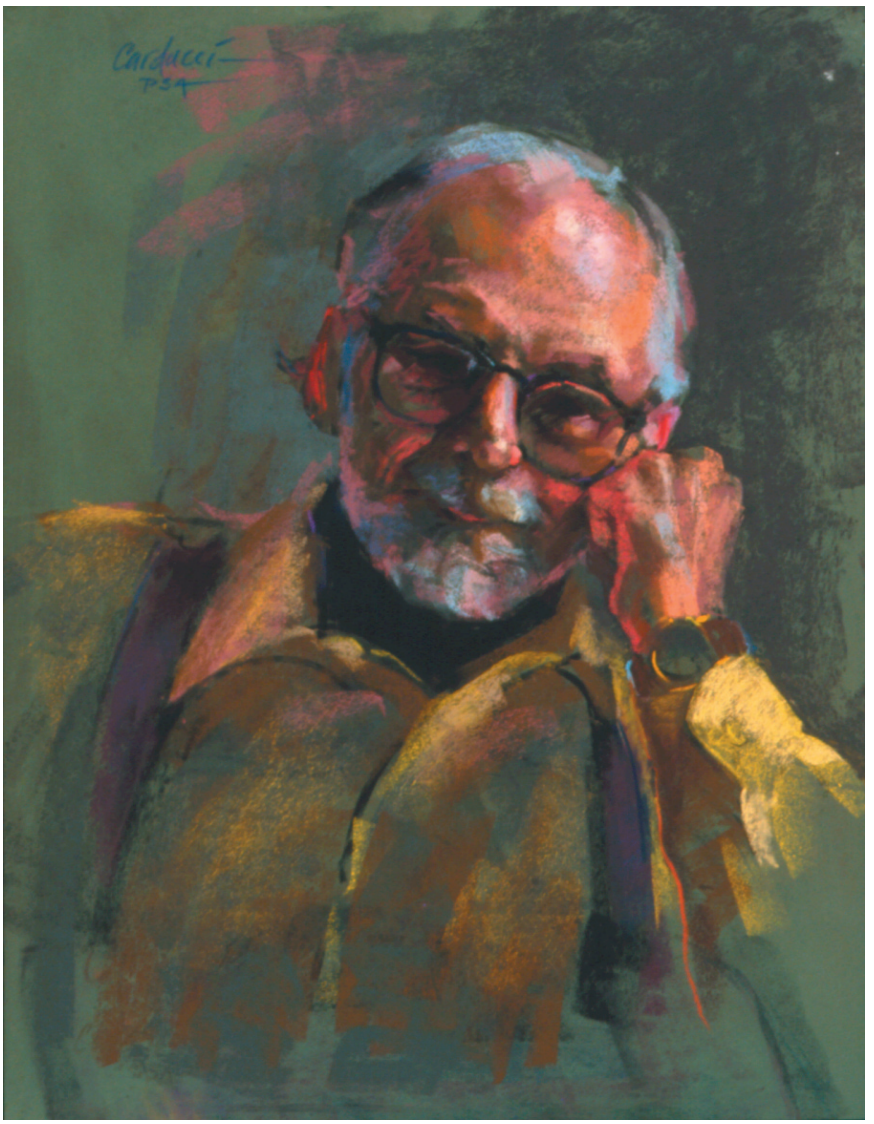
Portraits of Life

To capture that elusive something that makes each person different, you have to spend time getting to know your model. Judith Carducci and Naomi Campbell share how they get to the heart of their subjects to create portraits with feeling.

By Sandra Carpenter



Noting the arch of an eyebrow or placement of a hand on a chin. Discovering that the charismatic CEO sitting in front of you is actually a lover of classical literature. These are but a few of the characteristic gestures and traits of a person that a portrait artist trains herself to search for in a sitter and then capture in a painting. Along with this sleuthing ability, the painter faces the challenge of realistically rendering a likeness of a unique individual while also creating a work of fine art. The juggling act requires an astute understanding of your subjects as well as your materials.

To better understand the nuances of working successfully with a model, I talked to two professionals—Judith B. Carducci and Naomi Campbell—about their portrait techniques.

Judith B. Carducci

Mastering the Art of Commission Work

When working on a commission work, you have to do quite a bit of business before ever picking up a pastel. When approached to do a portrait, Hudson, Ohio, artist Judith Carducci makes the first step to say "Yes, I'd love to do it." Then she immediately begins fact-finding, asking the client a number of questions: Do you know my work? How did you come to want a portrait? What do you have in mind for it? What do you like about my paintings? "I show them samples of my work to see what they like," says Carducci. "I need to know whether they want head and shoulders, a full figure, a plain background, an interior setting or something outdoors. What's the picture in their head? We also have to talk about their budget and what they can afford."

Because she works from life, requiring at least one sitting at a minium, the artist also needs to know how much time the client can devote to a portrait. "If they can only give me one sitting, then it can't be an elaborate painting," she says. " The ideal number of sittings depends on the size of the painting and whether the customer wants a tight or free style." A more polished finish takes more time than a sketchy look, for instance, and a head-and-shoulders view

Kate (above left; 24x19) by Judith B. Carducci

John Romanyshyn at 80 (20x16) by Judith B. Carducci

Bon Vivant (opposite page; 24x30) by Judith B. Carducci

requires less time than a full figure. A single sitting lasts approximately three hours, during which the model poses for 20 to 30 minutes at a time and then rests for five. Children pose for less time, according to their ability.

"I explain the painting process to them, including the fact that they can watch in a full-length mirror as I work. I set a timer so that they're sure to have a break, but they can also get up whenever they need to, regardless of the timer. If it's a child that I'm painting, I ask who will be there with them. Finally, we discuss whether I will paint in their home or in my studio. If it's in their home, I have to improvise a temporary studio."

Working With a Model

"I don't tell a sitter what to wear because I want him or her to wear what he feels most comfortable and attractive in and what best expresses the style and personality of the sitter rather than mine," says Carducci. "We do talk about whether the portrait will be formal or informal and where it will hang to help narrow down the possibilities. Portraits are more interesting and individualized when the artist doesn't dictate too much."

Even if the portrait is to be a more formal one, Carducci wants her models to like what they're wearing. If they're uncomfortable, it will show through, she says and offers a story of a time when she painted two sisters. The first sister was painted at age nine in a flowered dress that she loved and posed comfortably in. Thanks to this, the painting turned out well. When the younger sister turned nine, she also came for her portrait. The mother wanted her to also wear a flowered dress, but when she arrived she was wearing denim shorts and a T-shirt. She was not at all happy about changing into the dress and, according to Carducci, this came through in the portrait. [Sandy: Was this story a direct quote?]

Peter, Between Yesterday and Tomorrow (36x24) by Judith B. Carducci

Putting Your Model at Ease

Finding a pose that's easy to hold is the first step to putting your mofel at ease. "As we talk about preliminaries, I watch to see how the sitter normally holds himself and what his characteristic body language is. If it's to be a sitting pose, I ask him to imagine he's alone at home and then to sit that way. Then I ignore him while setting up my materials and watch unobtrusively to see how he sits when not being observed. I've learned not to over-pose by remembering those strange and unnatural poses in high school yearbooks!"

During the painting process, Carducci talks to the models or has them listen to music. For children, she might ask a relative to read to them, or play a video of their choosing. She let's children set and control the timer, and—during a break—offers snacks and an opporunity to paint, color or draw. "If the pose changes as the sitter relaxes, I often change the painting rather than asking the sitter to resume the original pose." Carducci says these techniques are proven effective; she has never had a model who's been unable to loosen up.

Portrait Particulars

According to Carducci, a good portrait painting must be both a good likeness and a work of art. It should be well composed and show the vision of the artist as well as the artist's handwriting. It must be anatomically correct, skillfully drawn and painted, as well as interesting and arresting to look at.

One of the first places to run into trouble is skin tones. To determine skin tones, Carducci suggests you ask yourself three basic questions:

- What is the value—how dark or light?
- What is the temperature—how warm or cool?

• What is the intensity of the chroma—how saturated or grayed?

"I never know what colors I'm going to use until I begin a portrait," says Carducci, but her palette selections are, for the most part, chosen from her 78-stick Carducci Portrait & Figure pastel set by Great American Art Works.

"To get the proportions, I establish the basic gesture first by eyeballing and then check it with measuring. My working method is still evolving with practice and life experiences," she says. "I'm trying to achieve growth—to paint better and more expressively all the time. It's a goal never to be arrived at."

Then there's the tricky business of deciding when to quit. "A work is finished when I've achieved my goal for that particular painting," Carducci syas. "If I were to carry it to another stage, it would lose freshness or impact and it could not be improved by another stroke."

Lessons Learned

Early in her career, Carducci learned a valuable lesson about getting in tune with a client's needs. After a fellow artist failed to deliver a satisfactory portrait for a client, Carducci took the commission. The mother wanted a double portrait of her 9- and 7-year-old boys and had a strong vision in her head of what this painting should look like. Knowing that there had been problems with the previous attempt, Carducci had the parents look at her progress after every sitting. "I would explain the composition and the way the eye was being directed around the space. They were delighted and learned a lot. When I asked for the final approval of the painting, the father loved it but the mother raised objections for over an hour, asking for more clouds, more blue sky, darker hair—you name it. I didn't know what had gone wrong, as I had been so careful to have them be part of the process.

"Finally the husband figured it out: the wife had invested so much time in the portrait and been thinking about it for so long that she didn't want the process to be over. That taught me a lesson about delving into what your client truly wants from a portrait," says Carducci. "There are many things that can come up that don't have to do with the actual painting, but rather with the client's needs. You have to be clued in to what's going on."

"I've found that new portrait artists often run into a problem when they let the client dictate too much," says Carducci. "As the artist, you have to hear what the client has in mind, but you must also educate *them*. Don't let them make you a servant. Remember that you have the expertise on how to paint and compose the portrait."

Staying Inspired

Finally, portrait artists who do a lot of commissions will have times when it's hard to find inspiration in a subject. "Commissions can become potboilers where you keep the pot boiling but there's no inspiration coming out," says Carducci. "You just keep cranking out portrait after portrait and feel like you can't be creative because of the client. It can get deadly. If you feel ho-hum it will come through in your painting." So Carducci emphasizes the importance of making it interesting for yourself.

Role Reversal (30x24)
by Judith B. Carducci

To keep your commissioned portraits looking fresh, there are a number of things you can do. First, determine what's exciting, interesting and different about the person in front of you. "The thrilling thing about doing portraits is that everyone is special and different. If you can find what's special in them, it will translate into your painting," says Carducci. To help her capture the essence of a subject, the artist tries to describe the style and personality by naming it: "Is he shy or commanding? Subtle or complex? Active or passive? An intellectual? Vivid? Skeptical? Sad? Optimistic? Jolly? Critical? Glamorous? Or defiant? Whatever I decide, I keep that impression in the forefront of my thoughts while painting."

> "The thrilling thing about doing portraits is that everyone is special and different. If you can find what's special in them, it will translate into your painting."
>
> —*Judith B. Carducci*

And if a subject is bland, Carducci says you can still paint a beautiful portrait "by emphasizing lighting, surroundings, colors, patterns, textures or the pose."

And when you are in a rut. Carducci recommends painting a self-portrait as a good break from commission work. "It's a way to do something for yourself that doesn't cost anything. And you can try some new inspirations and ideas. It's a way of getting energized."

Naomi Campbell

Fire In Her Heart (30x20) by Naomi Campbell

Telling the Story of a Person

As she's traveling on the streets, sidewalks and subways around her New York City home, Naomi Campbell studies the faces around her. While it may look like she's people watching, she's actually sharpening her visual vocabulary in preparation for painting. For Campbell, painting people isn't just about recording a face; it's still about the interpretation and expression of an idea.

"There are stories on every face," says Campbell. "My intent is not to reproduce it, but to explore the emotional level. I look to my model to see what I have seen on the faces of people. I don't try to record what's before me, but rather what I'm interested in saying about something I've seen. It's not so much a recording of an image I'm after, but an expression. If I aimed for an exact likeness, my painting would lose its edge." Because of this motivation, Campbell is not painting as many standard commission portraits as she used to. "I need to feel that something is driving me to do the piece, so I mostly paint models and friends."

Campbell says she loves the expressiveness of hands and feet, as they're so unique to the individual. But to take a work beyond a likeness, you have to listen to what someone says and look at his or her gestures. "I take my time to see all this before I even think to begin painting," says Campbell. "Each person I paint is like a gem to me. When I do a portrait, I look for the person's soul or essence. One of my favorite things to do is to observe people on the subway. I look at their differences, their culture and behavior. To help me remember these things, I will sometimes pull out my sketchbook and make a few notes and sketches. And I also carry my camera with me everywhere I go to record any interesting situations. This city offers an infinite number and variety of people to paint thanks to its mix of cultures."

Prelude to a Painting

Campbell feels that a good portrait must show powerful emotional expression in combination with a skilled use of materials. "The two have to go hand in hand. If you're missing one, it will show. A piece of art should leave you with a feeling of emotional fulfillment.

"I use my camera to record backgrounds, but for the portraits themselves, I work from life in natural light," says Campbell. "I don't paint a portrait unless a person can sit in front of me." In terms of location, the artist sometimes has the model come to

"The beginning is critical to a painting as you have to have something powerful to start with in order to be able to finish with it ... It can't sputter out from the beginning and hope to be powerful at the end."—*Naomi Campbell*

her studio; other times, she goes to them. "I like to keep it fairly simple and give them 20-minute poses. But that can vary if I'm really into a painting." The artist's idea of the ideal number of sittings for a portrait varies from three hours to two weeks, depending on the energy between her and the model. "It's how you work together that's key when you're painting people. Sometimes it takes more time than others."

Establishing a Pose

Working on the advice of a former teacher, Campbell strives to "do something to go beyond the normal" in her portraits. For starters, she—like Carducci—figures out what makes a particular subject special. "I approach each subject differently as everyone is unique with a different combination of life experiences. I prefer to walk in on the model while he or she is relaxing or moving around naturally, and unearth the pose from there. Just recently, I walked into a room where my mother was asleep. I had a handful of pastels in my bag and I did a small painting of her. I like it when a painting happens naturally like that.

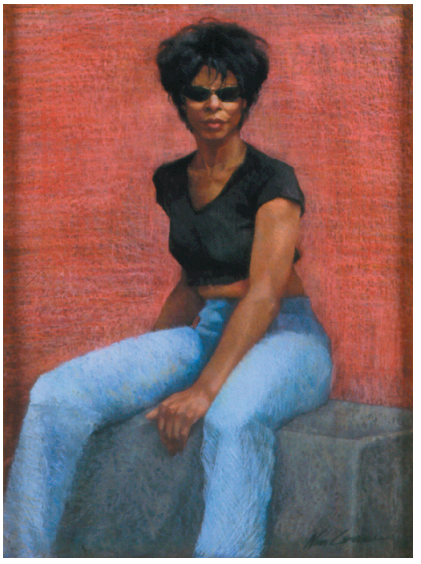
"I have to have a rich dialogue with my model," says Campbell. "I want him or her to be comfortable, so I will sit and talk to get to know my subject. Sometimes it takes a while. The more you know, the more you can select what you want to say about them. I also look and quietly observe."

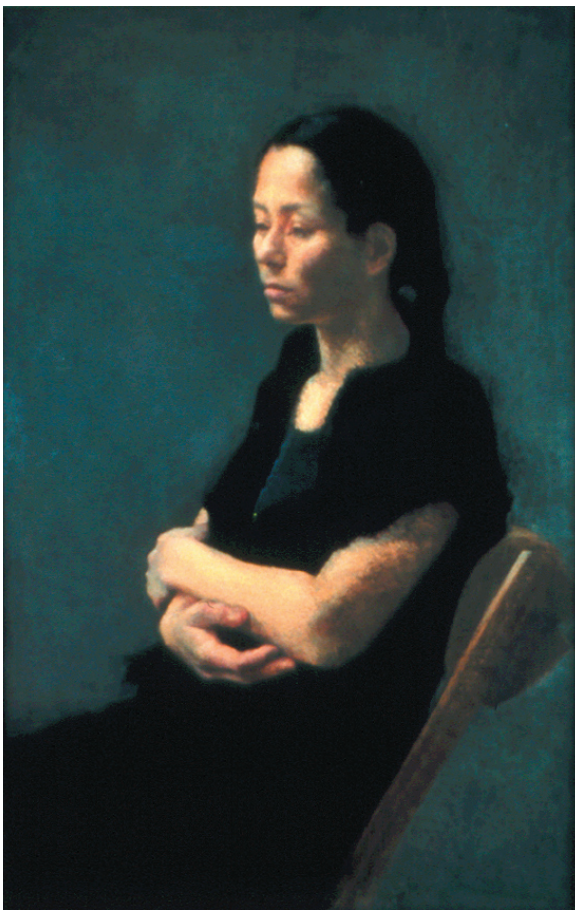
Campbell typically waits until her model is more relaxed, watching for a natural look before settling on a pose to paint. But until then, she keeps sketching. As soon as she sees what she wants, she tells the model to lock in the pose, explaining what she likes about what he or she has done. "In the model, I look for a confluence of an emotional, expressive quality together with an idea or concept. No two people are alike and thus no two poses would be the same."

Thoughts on Process

When Campbell started painting, she only had a set of 30 pastels, so she had to layer and experiment to see how each color bounces off the layer beneath. Now she enjoys experimenting with different brands of pastels. Her favorites include Rembrandt, Sennelier and Unison. "The Sennelier half-sticks are much more solid and can survive me dragging them across the top layers of the painting, but they're also soft enough to touch the surface. I like to paint rather than draw with the pastel as I feel out the shapes, rather than the linework. I love the richness and the texture you can create with pastel. I don't spray my pastels as I want the delicacy of my layers of colors—as well as my strokes and hand—to show on the surface."

Campbell rarely works on paper, instead preferring to work on board. "I like the solidity of the board, which is not only better for the build-up of the weave of color, but also allows the creation of more of a bite on the surface." Her painting process is to build layer upon layer of different colors—sometimes





Enigma (above left; 40x30) by Naomi Campbell

Illuminations (30x20) by Naomi Campbell

The Offering (40x30)
by Naomi Campbell

complementary, sometimes tertiary—to create visual mixing through overlapping. "This mixing is perceived by the eye as a richer palette. At the same time it creates textural markings that feel almost sculpted out of the surface with a Braille-like consistency.

"The beginning is critical to a painting as you have to have something powerful to start with in order to be able to finish with it," continues Campbell. "It's the energy and foundation of the painting. It can't sputter out from the beginning and hope to be powerful at the end. In the beginning, I create my foundation or framework with lines, using my entire arm for the movement. I love to play back and forth with rhythm—staccato and allegro strokes—and the vibrations in a work. I'm interested in conducting the rhythmic nature of movement as it shapes colors, creating a kinetic movement that gives emotional depth and a sculptural quality to the otherwise flat medium."

From there, Campbell locks in the light and shadow areas to create the fundamental movements and energy of the painting. Then she uses these to build both color and shape. "All the shapes are created in a certain way to move you. Sometimes the light will change and that will change my approach. The painting reaches its apex often in a hidden flash of light or in a nuance of the model that emerges but for a moment in the entire pose as he or she shifts around. I look for that moment, and it becomes the breaking point in the painting."

Emotional Development

Campbell enjoys it when a sitter takes an active role in the portrait and expresses him or herself in some way. "Sometimes a model will walk in with something—a sweater, jacket or scarf—and I'll ask her to leave it on. I see what works for the model. I find that people often come up with ideas I would never think of. It's often an accent of color or an accessory they like that will create a look and add nuance to the piece— like the sunglasses in *Enigma* (at 00). Those glasses, together with a powerful triangular pose, set the pace of the painting."

Of course, getting the personality of your sitter onto the board can be an elusive thing. "Emotional content is part of my work and it's that edge or emotional line that I look for. It creates so much tension. Sometimes I do it subconsciously: When you sit in front of a model long enough, it comes out. It's the silent dialogue between you and the sitter."

What Lies Beneath

Campbell likes to explore the properties of pastel in order to push them beyond the two-dimensional. Looking at sculpture has helped her develop a love of form; and from printmaking, she has learned a sensitivity to the graphic nature of texture. These skills have contributed to the development of the atmosphere in her work.

"My intent is to create what looks to be deceptively simple," Campbell says. "While at first glance the painting is about a seemingly static moment in time, it's actually loaded with expressive content. Using the idea of kinetic and static or potential energies, I'm playing with the rhythms of energy." Campbell compares the idea to a river that is quiet on the surface while deep below it races—"with a powerful undertow that swells up and carries you away."

"Working from life gives you a variety of situations you incorporate into a painting—from the overcast day that fills the room with a brooding atmosphere to a look that will suddenly come across a model's face and disappear as quickly as it came. Either way, you'll know that's what you want to focus on. Drama created by light, exaggerating the shape of the shadows, or a twist in the torso—such as we often see in Rodin's sculptures—will throw intense emotion into the piece. Whether it's pain or joy, I look for that. And then I put it into my portraits."

Sandra Carpenter is a Stockholm-based writer and the former editorial director of *The Pastel Journal*.