

Faces Artist David Jenks at Work

Story by K. Andarin Arvola

Well over a year after we met, David Jenks says the greatest artists painted people off the street. That's how David and I met and how, at this time, David has painted nearly forty portraits of individuals at the Redwood Coast Senior Center in Fort Bragg, California.

Out wandering around in Mendocino, just south of Fort Bragg, I happened into Silver and Stone. While looking at the jewelry and talking with Helena Bell, David asked if I would pose for a portrait. Skeptically I looked at him. He gave me his card, Helena vouched for him and I sat for a portrait which I got to keep. There's also a group of painters that meet on Palette Drive in Mendocino. They let you keep the portrait, too. It seems so old world. David explains that the portrait he did of me, and the ones at the senior center, are not finished portraits. He paints one a week, as more of an exercise to stay limber, to flex his painterly muscles. [Each painting requires] three to four hours [to complete, including] breaks to get up and walk around. His commissioned portraits take several, half-day sittings with time in between sittings. David asked if I knew other people he could paint. A few days later, at the senior center, I looked around at all those faces and called him.

I have an endless supply of faces, I told him. And so it began. At first, no one wanted to sign up, but as the faces appeared on the wall he was booked months in advance. Most people are in their seventies and eighties, with a sprinkle of ninety-year-olds. One lady is 101.

So, every Friday he paints. Seniors of particularly advanced age were encouraged to go first. I walk down the hall and see faces I've known, or rather that have known me, my whole life. People whose history I know. The faces. They draw me in, to look longer, to wonder how someone is if I haven't seen them in a while, to remember; to remember all those memories associated with that person.

The Artist

From his childhood, David Jenks, was inspired by the vivid, painterly book illustrations of N. C. Wyeth, and Howard Pyle, and his own mother at her drafting table doing free-lance commercial art. He began drawing at a young age, attending colleges and art schools, perfecting his art.

For some while now, portraits have him nearly possessed. They are his new love and greatest challenge. David, on his Website (www.djenks.com) states that he particularly admires the previous turn-of-the-century artists Claude Monet, John Singer Sargent, Joaquin Sorolla and many of the American impressionists. They painted the light, he says. The light is of utmost importance.

In his landscapes, seascapes and portraits, David seeks those vantage points where the light conveys a spiritual connection or energy. In his studio, he has a regular ritual of setting up, [David describes]. I block all the windows with cardboard and set up my own lighting. A light that's balanced for color; photographic light.

I've always tried to do one portrait a week but it's been catch as catch can. People can be suspicious. Sitting for a portrait doesn't fit a twenty-first century mind set. People expect instantaneous everything. They don't relate to a portrait of themselves, it's something they might see in a museum or a reception room. They don't see it as something they would do or subject themselves to.

People can be shy and not see themselves as viable subjects. I enjoy doing it so anyone is a viable subject. Or they see it as grandiose, culturally a more rarefied situation, David says, adding, The greatest artists painted people off the street.

John Singer Sargent is the artist David most admires. There's the distinction between content and style. Like music, David says. Sargent fires on all cylinders. His sense of color and taste and brush work is incredible. You can feel the artist at work, the stroke of the hand, the flow of the fabric less in the face where there's more blending.

Prior to the nineteenth century, artists tried to replicate, to duplicate nature which didn't betray the artist's activity in creating it. It's an alternative reality, David explains. Sargent is admired for the performance as well as a convincing portrayal of the person. David continues, A lot of portraying the personality of the subject has to do with the eyes. I always save them till the end. The rest of it is building a house getting the structure. The eyes are the key, the dessert. Even the idea of the way the moisture in the eye reflects light. Until you put that in, the face is like a mask. On a BBC special called The Human Face a brain surgeon stated that nearly half the brain is devoted to facial recognition. Portrait painting is skating on thin ice.

With people, the margin of error is negligible. With portraits, people instinctively know if it's not right, David says. The representation of people, he continues, is a drawing problem to get the likeness of the person, to get all the things in proportion, the structure that is creating that illusion of three dimensions in two. The threshold challenge is to have the portrait look like the person.

Painting older people, in a way, there are more visual markers to make that drawing. Beautiful, young people are harder. It's a subtler process. I consider these to be very rough, not finished portraits, because of the constraint of the three hours. In the heat of the moment, you don't have the time to step back, David notes.

Asked if he ever painted from photographs, David says that he does on a regular basis. Nature doesn't sit still like people. The camera distorts the face. It would be easier to do a likeness, a recognizable image but unless you take several photos you don't get a sense of the life of the person, the time you spend with them, he says. In the sense of an exercise, a drawing challenge, that part is completely fulfilled. It might not be polished but the need to come up with a likeness, the need to exercise that skill is fulfilled. It's totally absorbing. It's the high concentration, the pressure a lot to be done in a limited amount of time. Since I'm not a facile painter, it's not an easy thing for me to do. The beauty of this situation is I have great subjects and I can control the setting.

The experience of interacting here with the people and what it's meant to the senior center, David pauses. I may have anticipated it but not to the extent that it's been significant. It's been interesting meeting people. Besides, I was doing this anyway; giving away the portraits as a carrot. It's my most favorite thing to do. To be able to bring somebody to life in a picture is satisfying, more than satisfying; a bigger thrill.

As mentioned, there are about forty or more portraits that can be viewed at the Redwood Coast Senior Center. I spoke with people about sitting for a portrait, and since the New Year is upon us, [I asked for] any advice they might care to pass on.

The Subjects

It's wonderful to see the eyes of seniors light up when they recognize their friends, says Joe Curren, executive director of Redwood Coast Seniors. It's an extraordinary way to honor, to immortalize our older citizens. What a privilege it is to have the work of such a fine artist displayed in our senior center. In looking ahead, I hope David Jenks continues to do this work. I hope that when the time comes that he does leave us, we will find other fine artists to carry on with what is becoming a tradition, Joe adds.

Joe remembers that in the past, the center has done oral histories of seniors' lives but even when properly recorded, these histories are read by very few, whereas, the histories in the faces of our elders are readily accessible for all.

When people see them it conjures up all sorts of memories about what these people are about. Joe says that while every age has its virtues, it's a privilege to be around our most experienced people. The senior center intends to keep these portraits indefinitely to remember these dear friends.

Joe's portrait on the wall is [at the senior center]. He says he was drafted for it by the staff and David. I enjoyed talking to him, he shares. It's very fun to have a portrait.

Laura Gibney didn't have any trouble sitting for her portrait, I could have sat for another two days. I didn't get bored. I love them, she enthusiastically [reports]. Laura heard one lady say she didn't like hers but she thought, I wonder why it looks just like her!

This seems to be a common reaction with everyone. They're not always sure they like their own, but they are sure their friends' portraits look just like them!

Laura and her husband used to travel a lot and she's never seen anything like this.

There's no where in the world that has what's being done here. My brother, Carleton Shannon, drives a bus and takes eighty people at a time on trips. This is the nicest senior center he's seen. The food is good and he wants to show the portraits to everyone.

Laura's family moved to Westport in 1946 from the Shannon Ranch in the wilderness area of Trinity County. My life has always been good, she says. Since I've met Jesus Christ as my personal savior nothing is too hard.

Leta Bottani says, I don't really have any advice [for the New Year]. Well, she pauses, Keep active so your brain will work well. Eat right, I have my oatmeal every morning. And, I sleep alone. Pretty bare bones advice but it's served Leta for 101 years.

One look at the portrait of Leslie Hayter and it's easy to see why *The Sea Wolf*, by Jack London, had such an impact on him. Leslie explains that he built ocean-going sailboats. That's why [he wears] the cap, he says.

To see the cap, [go] to the senior center.

Leslie continues, There's not much excitement in getting your portrait painted. You just sit there half-asleep. When pressed, he admits that David made it look like I feel.

Leslie reflects upon the New Year, I've lived to eighty-seven years because I've learned not to worry. Worry is the worst. Get up and get interested in something. Fix it or forget it. And, if it's working, don't fix it.

Kit Penitenti is usually loquacious, but on the subject of portraits he was more reticent. Kit, who is ninety-six [years old], says, I've never sat for a portrait but it looks like the old buzzard that walks around here. His advice: Keep your nose out of other people's business.

Never been in trouble, states Kit.

Never got caught! exclaims his friend John Buck Cernac.

He [Jenks] was great, says Florence Figueiredo. It's the first time I've ever had my portrait painted. I so enjoyed

it. If I got tired, David would say, get up and walk. He did a beautiful job.

Florence is one of the people who had copies made at S&S Printing to give to her family.

Florence says, Be happy and active. Volunteer when you can. I m always busy, she says. I m a member of the Native Daughters of the Golden West, Noyo Women for Fisheries, Ladies Alter Society, the Garden Club, Widows and Widowers, American Legion. That s it, I think.

It s difficult to believe [she is] seventy-six years old, but [Florence s] advice clearly works for her.

Art Morley has sat for his portrait twice in Mendocino, and it may have something to do with the fact that his wife belongs to the Palette Drive portrait group. It s painless, he says convincingly. You can get up, have a break. You don t have to pose nude. Some people ask that, Do I have to pose nude? if they re going to be an artist s model.

I like the portrait, he does a good likeness and I think he flatters people. I took it down to S&S printers and got a copy to keep for myself, he says.

Art, who was raised on the coast, doesn t [offer] any advice [for the New Year] but he does say, We re lucky to have the senior center and all the services and we have such a good chef in Salavador Meza.

Patrick Gallagher has been on the coast eight years. His son John came for the woodworking course at the College of the Redwoods. Patrick came to visit him and he s still here. He says that as of April 18, 2005 he will be 39,447,000.00 minutes old.

No novice to portraits, Patrick says that he s had his painted about forty times. This is the best so far. His three sons are artists and they ve painted him. He s also been at the Palette Drive studio. Patrick has studied art and says about David Jenks, He s a fabulous artist. It s a tremendous view of these people. It s a good thing for the senior center, he adds.

What Patrick learned from meditating for years is the truth of the statement, made eight centuries ago by Zen Master Dogen, Nothing is permanent. Everything is in a constant state of change, says Patrick, but these portraits give us an opportunity to see everyone as they were.

They re absolutely fantastic! Look at the cave paintings that were created thirty thousand years ago. This place is greatly improved with these portraits in our cave . Being trained as a scientist, I think art is the basic form of human experience, Patrick adds.

Ana Marie Baez-Bruenger and I had [only] moments to speak but she says, the portraits show the inner spirit. And, perhaps she would find time to write a book called Impressions of an Artist s Model.

Lucille Prince, ever pragmatic, asks, The portraits are wonderful but what are we going to do when we run out of walls? She says she thoroughly enjoyed the time with David. He s a wonderful person. He really brings out the features. He makes it look like I m going to kill someone but then, I look like that a lot. It s true to me, she says.

Reflecting on the New Year, I firmly believe that a lot of illness is because we get too stressed out. I have a deep faith and I know the Good Lord will take care of me, but avoiding stress is important. Staying calm. The calm person throws off illness easier, Lucille concludes.

New at being eighty-nine [years old], Larry Spring says it was at the Palette Drive group the first time he had his portrait painted, about five years ago. This time, with David Jenks, Larry says, I didn't take any chances [of people not recognizing me]. I had my name on it was a plastic pin. His is the only portrait with a name as part of the portrait, nearly everyone else has their name on the frame.

I've done a lot of painting. The young faces are too smooth. Older people's faces have more wrinkles and more character. I went back another time to watch him paint. I think it's great that they're here (in the senior center), not mine necessarily, but it's a wonderful record of the people here. They're all characters, all individuals, Larry says.

[Being] one of the great characters on the coast, Larry adds, If I could learn to live forever then I'd have plenty of time to do everything I wanted. Clearly, Larry, a vital and vibrant man, follows his own advice when he says, Eat what you want, but you have to be active to use yourself up and then eat again to replace yourself. Balance food, exercise and contentment. Be happy with your lot in life.

It's very generous of David to do this for the senior center, concludes Larry.

Shirlee Pitt is another that belies her age (of seventy-four), vibrant and direct, she says, David spent six and one-half hours on mine. I really don't like it. My daughter said I looked worried and David said, Well, you were worried.

I think it's a wonderful idea to do the portraits. He did a great job with my jewelry. I don't really like it, his color is lovely and true, but I don't see myself that way, Shirlee says.

Shirlee has seven children and made copies for all of them.

Seniors need some hope, they need more than a square meal, Shirlee notes. They need something to do to feel useful.

Art Stoughton volunteers as a busboy for lunches at the senior center. (My mother volunteered as a waitress for years.) His advice for anyone contemplating having their portraits painted: I think that no one would have a portrait done if they didn't want to because they would know where they'd be up on the wall.

I thought it was great, he continues. We talked a bit, I know him a bit. I enjoyed it.

When I asked Art, as I did nearly everyone, if I could reveal his age, he says, At a certain age you don't want to hear about your age but at the same time you're proud of it. I'm seventy-five.

Art's advice [for the New Year] is to stay as active as you can. I live in Comptche and volunteer. Sometimes I stay [in town] and go to First Friday.

On the first Friday of each month [in Fort Bragg] (and the second Saturday in Mendocino), each town has galleries and stores that stay open late. It's a social evening and sometimes a commercial one, as well.

I enjoy volunteer work, it makes me feel good. Older people who have volunteer jobs get protective of them, Art says. It keeps you going.

[Referring back to] David Jenks, one lady who wishes to be anonymous says, It was nice to look in his face for four hours.

David Jenks can be reached at www.djenks.com.

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