

Lifestyles/Arts

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About Face

By Georgette Gouveia
Staff Writer

In the current Vanity Fair, there's a photo of Brad Pitt by Annie Leibovitz that shows Hollywood's latest hunk sprawled across a bed in a room that can only be described as belonging to Motel America (pages 70 and 71, ladies).

Pitt's wearing leopard-print pants, and his left arm is tucked behind his head in '40s sex-goddess fashion. As the camera moves in at a low angle, he stares off into space.

What's interesting here is that Leibovitz used the same pose in her portrait of Tom Cruise for the October Vanity Fair, but oh, to what different effect! There, Cruise — wearing a white shirt and pin-stripe pants and resting on crimson cushions — gazes directly at the camera, which is overhead.

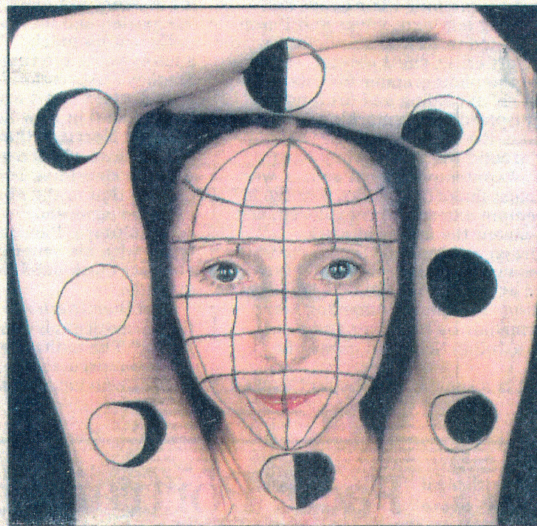
Two portraits, two kinds of male beauty — one, wild and sensual; the other, more formal and controlled.

Laura Vookles, curator of collections at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, says of Leibovitz: "In all her photos, there is a sense of fun between her and the subject."

A portrait, then, is not only about its subject. It's about the relationship between the subject and the

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Two friends with distinct personalities are painted by portrait artist Fran Lew. Top left, Armonk resident Barbara Greer's blond softness is expressed with pastel colors. For Leslie Manes of North Salem, top right, Lew employs a direct gaze and a richer backdrop. Right, 'Lunation,' a photograph at the Hudson River Museum's 'Making Faces: American Portraits,' shows the relationship between woman and the moon.



*Portraits reveal
the artists
as well as
their subjects*

Here's how to save face

A portrait can cost anywhere from several hundred dollars to tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the medium, the kind of portrait and, of course, the renown of the artist.

Generally, pastel and charcoal works are less expensive than oils. A study of a person's face is less costly than a full-length portrait. Because of the expenditure, both financial and emotional, portraiture is not something to enter into lightly. Here are a few tips:

► Keep your eyes and ears open. Barbara Greer of Armonk says that after she saw the painting Fran Lew did of her friend, North Salem resident Leslie Manes, she decided to have her own portrait done as a surprise birthday gift for her husband. But if you don't have a friend with a portrait . . .

► Do some homework. "Galleries always have referrals," Lew says.

She also suggests consulting the Westchester Arts Council, which maintains a slide registry of artworks that include portraits (428-4220). Wherever you look, Hudson River Museum director Philip Verre says it's important to become familiar with the artists' styles.

► Communicate, communicate, communicate. Ask the artist about fees, whether a deposit is required and whether it's refundable should you detest your portrait. (Mary Whigham Hargrave says that if a client were to hate the result, despite changes, she would keep the painting but also the deposit.) Once you decide to go ahead with your portrait, don't be afraid to share your likes and dislikes with the artist. This, observers say, will minimize any surprise at the end.

► Be realistic. "The artist is obligated to paint the portrait in a style the client becomes familiar with and to get a reasonable likeness," Lew says. But no artist can transform you into what you aren't.

— Georgette Gouveia

Face: Portraits reveal artists, too

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artist. And that makes portraiture a risky business.

"Still life, landscape — all have their challenges. But portraiture is the most challenging," says Fran Lew of White Plains, who's been commissioned to paint former Gov. Mario Cuomo's official portrait for the Hall of Governors at the State Capitol Building in Albany.

Just as no other genre is as concerned with the tension between the artist and the subject, no other genre draws such a fine line between perception and reality.

"(A portrait) is a painting for painting's sake," says Philip Verre, director of the Hudson River Museum, whose "Making Faces: American Portraits" opens Friday. "At the same time, the question always lingers, 'What does the person look like?' There's always that tension."

The portrait, then, is a metaphor for the artifice that is art.

Visual biography

"The art of portraiture," Lew says, "is to capture the feeling and character of a person. The likeness is important, but to convey the feeling of the person is more important."

To that end, the portrait artist seeks to know as much as possible about his subject through conversation and observation, and barring that, through talks with family and friends.

"A lot of it is communication," says Larchmont portrait artist Mary Whigham Hargrave, who is resident artist at Lord & Taylor in Eastchester. "As far as the clients are concerned, they have to see the artist's work so they know his style. . . I like them to come to my studio. . . The first interview is important, because they tell you what they want."

Gilbert Stuart, represented in the Hudson River Museum show by one of his portraits of George Washington, liked to chat with the father of our country as he painted him, says Vookles. This vexed Washington, who apparently was first in war, first in peace but last in small talk.

Washington might have had it easier today, when many portrait artists work from photographs.

Preferred portraits

Ask experts to name their favorite portrait painter, and they will invariably come up with not only one name, but one painting. The name is John Singer Sargent, and the painting is "The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs. Adeane, and Mrs. Tennant," part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan.

"He was the most brilliant portrait artist of his age and influenced many portrait artists," says portrait painter Fran Lew. "His painterly technique, the fluidity of his brush strokes. . . the grace he captured, the beautiful tenderness of the sisters — it's exquisite."

Laura Vookles, the Hudson River Museum's curator of collections, recommends two works. "Azalea," John White Alexander's study of 19th-century beauty Helen Abbe Howson as a woman lost in reverie, is part of the museum's collection and of its upcoming show on portraits. Rembrandt Peale's study of his brother, "Rubens Peale with Geranium," is part of the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. "It's just so crisply painted," she says.

These are more traditional portraits. For those looking for something in a modern vein, Hudson River Museum director Philip Verre recommends Elaine de Kooning's "Portrait of Michel Sonnebend," also part of the museum's portrait show. He says: "It tests the waters of where abstraction and representation meet."

— *Georgette Gouveia*

Hargrave and Lew take lots of pictures of their subjects — talking with them and experimenting with different poses, settings and lighting to get them to relax and open up.

"By their selecting three or four photographs and ordering their choices, I can find out what

they like," says Hargrave.

Portrait artists don't rely on photography alone. Lew takes notes on such details as the client's flesh tones. Hargrave also has her subjects sit for her once the painting begins. Both say they encourage conversation with their subjects throughout the preparation of the portraits.

"My goal is to please the client," says Lew, who did Matilda Cuomo's official portrait when she was first lady of this state.

To achieve that goal, portrait artists have traditionally erred on the side of optimism.

"In the 19th century, they saw the person as a representation of certain qualities," Vookles says. "A lot of portraiture was wishful thinking."

Says Hargrave: "I look at people through rose-colored glasses. . . I want to be realistic, but I want to show the person in the best light."

Still, she and other portrait artists draw a line that they will not cross.

Says Lew: "I'll defer to the client's wishes if it doesn't hurt the integrity of the painting."

That integrity can exact a high price. Thomas Eakins, the subject of a current exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was so uncompromising in his depiction of people that he received few commissions, and some of those who posed for him refused to accept their portraits as gifts.

Context is key

Eakins was among those 19th-century painters who used photography as a tool to see people more clearly. But photography has also had a profound effect on portraiture, as a medium in which portraits can be made and as a liberating device.

"Photography freed artists," Vookles says, "because the exact duplication of the likeness could be done by the photograph."

Today, artists use portraits to explore not only the individuality of their subjects, but also questions of sexual and cultural identity. Artists do this in a time-honored fashion — by paying as much attention to the backdrop as they do to the subject.

One of the works in the Hudson River Museum show is a

See for yourself

► "Making Faces: American Portraits"

Museum: Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Ave., Yonkers.

Dates: Friday through Aug. 27. (Closed June 12-20.)

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Fridays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays.

Admission: \$3; \$1.50 for children age 12 and under and for senior citizens age 62 and over.

Phone: 963-4550.

► "Thomas Eakins and the Metropolitan Museum of Art"

Museum: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, Manhattan.

Dates: Through Feb. 26.

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. Sundays and Tuesdays-Thursdays, 9:30 a.m. to 8:45 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Suggested admission: \$7; \$3.50 for students and senior citizens; free for children under age 12 who are accompanied by an adult.

Phone: (1-212) 879-5500.

► Pastel Society of America show (including portraits by Mary Whigham Hargrave)

Gallery: Lever House Gallery, Park Avenue and 53rd Street, Manhattan.

Dates: Through Feb. 14.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 1 to 5 p.m. Sundays.

Admission: Free.

Phone: (914) 834-7586.

Leibovitz photograph of choreographer Mark Morris that puts the bad boy of dance in a jungle setting reminiscent of an Henri Rousseau painting.

"She's using the conceit of art and painting to make a statement about Morris as a noble savage," Vookles says. "Context is it. Understanding the context of a portrait — both within the artwork and under what circumstances it was created — is the key to reading its fullest meaning."