
DAVID WELLS ROTH: JUDICIAL PORTRAITS

When I interviewed David Wells Roth the first time http://artbookguy.com/david-wells-roth-space-light-shadow_420.html, I knew I'd eventually chat with him again about his work as an artist of judicial portraits <http://davidwellsroth.com/portraits.html>. He has done portraits of all 33 judges in the Federal Court of Puerto Rico. How did this even happen? Read on and find out ...

MICHAEL: David, You're the first artist that I'm interviewing twice. However, your judicial portrait work warrants exploration. I would imagine this work is quite lucrative. How did it come about?

DAVID: Thank you so much. I am very honored. I've always loved to draw and paint people. To express character and personality through painting is among my greatest artistic challenges. The road to the Puerto Rico judicial portraits started in 2006 in Boston when I completed a portrait for the Boston Federal Court of Hon. Judge Richard Stearns. Judge Stearns was for a time the presiding judge in the James "Whitey" Bulger case, here in Boston. When it was completed, it was announced throughout the 1st Circuit, which includes Puerto Rico. The Chief Judge of Puerto Rico's Federal Court happened to be in the final stages of planning a project to paint the portraits of all 33 judges in the history of Puerto Rico's Federal Court. After hearing about Judge Stearns' portrait, the Chief Judge invited me to Puerto Rico to talk about his project. As we were discussing the time frame for completion, I felt I could do it within 5 years, but he wanted it within three – so I did it in three by simply adding a few more hours to the 24-hour day! After I had finished Judge Stearns' portrait, I had, of course, hoped it would lead to further commissions, so you can imagine my surprise at the scale of the Puerto Rico commission! The full scope of that project didn't hit me until after I saw the final portrait hanging with all the others in the main hall of the court. It was a feeling of vertigo with delayed panic. You may wonder if this project was funded out of our taxes, but it was entirely funded by private donations.

MICHAEL: Judicial portraits are very important so even if tax money had paid for them it certainly would be worth it. So wait, how did you do these portraits? Obviously, most of these judges were deceased, weren't they? And did the living ones sit for you?

DAVID: The project was being planned for at least three to four years prior to my coming on board. The project spanned the entire history of the Federal Court of Puerto Rico, so the first portrait would be of the first judge who sat on the bench as soon as Puerto Rico became a United States possession after the Spanish-American war ended in 1898. The last portrait would be the most recent judge appointed. The first judge I painted was an American appointed by President McKinley in 1899 and the last one was Puerto Rican, appointed by President Bush in 2006. The first 12 Judges were American and the rest that followed were Puerto Rican.

Throughout the first years of the planning stages, the court librarian was trying to research images for the first 15 or so judges. Many of the visual records were nearly impossible to locate. She sent numerous emails to universities, courthouses, anything that could possibly yield results until she had at least one readable image to use. About two-third of the Judges were deceased, as the project spanned more than a century, so many of the images were faded and bleached. The project was to be painted in my studio in Massachusetts then shipped to San Juan as I completed around six at a time. As for the living ones, I painted watercolor studies of each one mainly to allow myself a few hours to sit with the judge and familiarize myself with them as they moved and spoke to me, so I could see their faces in action. Then I took between 200-400 photos of each individual, so as to

capture them in every possible pose and environment – on the bench, at their desk, standing sitting, etc., until I got what I wanted. I had to be absolutely sure I had everything I needed, because they were so far from my studio and there was no room for error.

MICHAEL: And so, you clearly had the challenge of balancing the humanity of the individual judges with the nobility of their calling. How did you achieve this in each portrait? What artistic devices did you employ?

DAVID: I think I could write volumes on each portrait, but I'll site just a few examples. Due to the sheer volume of the number of portraits, one of my primary concerns was to keep each portrait a unique and individual personality from the next. I was painting six at a time, so I ran the risk of having them become factory-made, cookie-cut, stamped-out images wearing black robes.

A great deal of thought went into every aspect of each painting, from style of the painting technique, objects within the painting's composition (that were personal to each judge), to the pose of the subject, lighting and down to the style of the frame. As for the frame, I didn't repeat a single frame within the series to further enhance the uniqueness of each subject and the time period they lived in and tried as well, to be sure the frame was a complementary element to the painting. Also, I soon began to understand that I wasn't only painting individuals, but I saw this as a chance to design the entire series and how it would appear as a whole within the room they would hang.

Another challenge was to keep the painting style of each portrait contemporary to the time period the judge lived in, so as to create the impression that they were not all painted at the same time, but over the span of a century and hopefully by different artists. As I was describing that concept to the chief judge (the man responsible for this commission) at our first meeting, I joked that the judges of the 1920's - 30's era would be painted as cubist paintings – he didn't seem to be sure if I was kidding or not.

Of course, I had limitations for the deceased judges, since I had no control over their pose or composition from the original photo reference given to me. In some cases, there was a faded snapshot of only their head available. In some of these cases, I posed myself for the painting reference to create the sense of drama that I wanted to express in the character of the judge that I gleaned from their face. In one case, the only photo I had was of the judge standing before a white wall and that was it. I used photos of the original courtroom that he sat in during the early 1950s. Within that environment, I had the present chief judge pose as he remembered him, when he was a young lawyer, giving cases in front of him. I tried to convey the feeling he was actually painted in his courtroom from live sittings.

As for the chief judge's own portrait, I posed him in the most classical Dutch-like, Rembrandt-esque pose I could come up with to try to convey that "noble" sense. But, as he was a motorcycle and high-performance car enthusiast, I placed models of his favorite vehicles behind him within the somberly lit background – just above his law books.

One of the other judges was also an Olympic sailor. He stressed to me at our photo session that he "was a sailor first and then a judge." I found that to be rather fun and interesting. So I painted his sailboat into the background of his portrait as well as a photo of him and his wife as they sailed around Cape Horn and fitted his painting with a frame that looked like it was made from the hull of a sailboat. He liked the idea of that frame and suggested that I put fish heads in the corners connected by ropes. I came very close to doing that.

As far as the nobility of their calling - if I was accurate in my interpretation of their features and in the objects included in the painting and if I was true to the form I was trying to paint, then whatever nobility there was would hopefully emerge through the painting, as well as their humanity. I guess during the execution of the painting, one of my main goals was the integrity of visual accuracy.

MICHAEL: Contemporary photography is very hot right now and appears to be settling into a type of permanency. Do you think digital photographs will someday replace painted portraits?

DAVID: They already have in many cases. However, I do think that there may always be a niche for the painted portrait. I believe that so long as the skills and a desire to paint portraits exist, I think there will always be someone that would want the more “traditional” portraiture. After all, photographs have been in existence for over 180 years already with outstanding photos for over 80 years, but still the oil portraits continue to be in demand.

I asked a portrait photographer friend of mine this question of photographs replacing paintings and without hesitation, said “NO.” One of the things he said is that a photograph captures a single moment of the person where a painting has combined moments, then added he added that one has to ask why, since digital photographs have reached an outstanding level of quality, are they not lining the walls of the White House or the Supreme Court?

In my opinion, there is a difference between the photograph and the painting. With a painting there is of course the paint. The paint itself carries qualities that convey visual sensations and expressions of emotion, but when applied to and combined with a form, be it a landscape, still life or person, the paint will add a different dimension to the subject that a photo simply can’t produce, mainly because, with every brush stroke or color note there is a world of expression that is already conveyed. Then, there is the actual portrait itself. Like my friend said: “a painting has combined moments.” That is an interesting idea that hadn’t crossed my mind before. What it says to me is that a painted portrait is metaphorically more three-dimensional than a single instant. I’m sure this idea can open the doors to holographic and photographic experimentation to try to build on this concept, but will the result hang on a wall to document and immortalize the existence of a person? Who knows?

Fundamentally, I see my portraits like this: These images are not reproductions of an object. They are interpretations of a visual and emotional impression that the person has on me. The subject is interpreted by my emotional response to the character of the person through the light, color, atmosphere, etc., which combined creates a ‘mood,’ with a built-in subtle “caricature” in the actual drawing. I’m not referring to a cartoonish distortion, but more an emphasis on expression that can enhance the emotional response of the viewer to the qualities of the subject as I see and feel it. This acts as a vehicle to transmit my own emotional response. I guess I can say that by the fact that I am “interpreting” the person, this is therefore the key element involved in the process. That is, that a person is doing the interpreting and expressing and not a mechanical device, thus keeping the humanity in the picture, so to speak. Sure the photo can be manipulated and distorted, but the root of the image is an interpretation by a machine with no emotions.

Of course, the flip side of this is that in a photograph, the photographer is doing the creating and the subject is viewed as a stark facsimile in a moment of that person. I’m sure there are people who will appreciate this concept of portraiture above the other. I guess that’s what makes the world go ‘round. There is plenty of room in the garden for all kinds of fruits, vegetables and flowers and everyone can choose what they fancy.

MICHAEL: Very cool. Thanks David. This has been great.

DAVID: Thanks Michael for the wonderful opportunity to you gave me.

Check out David’s gallery of judicial portraits here ... <http://davidwellsroth.com/portraits.html>.