

Honoring Dedication to their Craft

By Christine Egnoski

Since 2014, the Portrait Society has honored a select number of artists with the unique designation of Signature Status. This honor is achieved through a demonstration of exceptional work and dedication to both the aesthetic and educational mission of the Society. This year's recipients are: **Anna Rose Bain, Stephanie Deshpande, Jeffrey Hein, Olga Krimon, Gregory Mortenson, Paul Newton, Evert Ploeg, Alicia Ponzio, William Suys, Hsin-Yao Tseng, Patricia Watwood, John Seibels Walker, Thomas Wharton and Stephen Zhang.** I had the distinct pleasure of speaking with this year's honorees about their artistic goals and experiences and the message that they hope to communicate through their art.

EGNOSKI: Education, workshops and books all guide an artist in developing their talent and skills. What has personally assisted you in your artistic career?

BAIN: I would not be where I am today without (a) the books that aided me during my childhood, (b) my knowledgeable college professors who taught me the basics of classical art, (c) the many wonderful artists I was privileged to take workshops with after college, and (d) the Portrait Society of America (I've attended eight conferences!). I've had informal mentors and friends in the art world who have taught me more than I could possibly recount here. I am grateful to every person that has influenced my journey. I think the key is to realize you can learn from everyone with whom you cross paths.

DESHPANDE: I had a wonderful experience attending New York Academy of Art for



Anna Rose Bain, *Judy in Blue*, oil, 18 x 14" (46 x 36 cm)

graduate school. It was the first time I was with a group of artists who were all seeking classical training. I felt such camaraderie

with my peers and learned so much from my instructors. Since graduating, Richard Schmid's book *Alla Prima: Everything I Know About*

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Painting helped me develop additional skills, as well as a workshop with Amaya Gurpide and Jordan Sokol at the Florence Academy of Art.

HEIN: While I did have a few teachers in college who helped me get started, my greatest education has come from studying the paintings of artists I admire, both living and dead. Whenever possible I try and expose myself to original art. While in front of great paintings, I study every element of the painting and ask myself what makes this painting so successful. I try and get into the mind of the artist and write down everything that I discover.

KRIMON: I received a formal art education in Russia in a four-year art school. That's what started it all. Aside from courses on composition, drawing, painting and sculpture, we also had mandatory art history classes, and I received a BA in art history as well. I truly believe that this is very helpful in my career as an artist. I continued to develop through drawing classes with Glen Orbik and painting classes with Jeremy Lipking. I learn every day,



Stephanie Deshpande, *The Fall*, oil, 16 x 20" (41 x 51 cm)



Jeffrey Hein, *Judith*, oil, 12 x 16" (30 x 41 cm)

every time I look at a painting that I love, every time I paint. It's such a blessing.

MORTENSON: My artistic career has been sculpted by a long list of educators. My dad was my first influence, then in college it was Del Parson and Perry Stewart. After that, my path crossed with many other artists who sculpted a piece of the artist I would become: William Whitaker, Patrick Devonas, Jacob Collins, Travis Schlaht, Kate Lehman, Michael Grimaldi, Scott Waddell, Ted Minoff, Cami Davis and Dan Thompson, to name but a few of my instructors who were influential in my development.

NEWTON: Watching other artists demonstrate their painting methods and discuss their techniques has been enormously helpful, as has reading about the working methods of Old Masters. Hearing of the difficulties that they

ached and realizing that even the greatest of the Old Masters struggled to produce their works. The creative process wasn't always easy, even for these great ones! Of course, nothing beats seeing the works of the masters "in the flesh" at art museums as I travel.

PLOEG: When I first left design college, I worked in commercial illustration and I was very lucky to not be boxed into one type of genre and medium. This afforded me the opportunity to experiment with confidence and began to find my voice. Then, I was involved with an Australian theater production where I was on stage, painting the portrait of an actor while he performed for an audience. Working in this unusual way presented many constraints—time, lighting and a constantly moving subject. This forced me to trust my instincts and make fast decisions. This experience proved invaluable to me and has played a major part in how I approach my work today.

PONZIO: There are two aspects of my education that I found to be invaluable. (1) Spending time in museums and galleries, or with artwork in any setting, has helped me to solve a lot of problems. I learned to approach the work with an open mind and consider the choices made by the artist, rather than reacting to the work passively. (2) The ability to focus one's attention is an important factor in learning. During my student years, I actively worked on developing this skill in various ways. I learned to avoid distractions and to consider my own natural working habits and build on those.

SUYS: Though I'm thankful for guidance that has come through countless books, images, places and people—I am a self-driven artist. Every day of my life, I recognize that there is room to grow and opportunity to seek understanding from every source, now and forever. The only way to seek and achieve personal excellence is to get behind the wheel and drive. I draw and paint because it is what I do.

TSENG: I have gone to some great schools, workshops and am self-taught from master books. I really appreciate my school, the



Olga Krimon, *Jaded*, oil, 34 x 24" (86 x 61 cm)

Academy of Art University, for really pushing me and building my strong foundation skills. I am grateful to learn from my mentor Craig Nelson and Zhaoming Wu for guiding me in how to be a successful artist.

WATWOOD: When I began my studies and became interested in figurative painting, I did workshops with artists like Anthony Ryder

and John Nava. The best advice I received was: if I wanted to seriously pursue a career in the arts, then I needed to take whatever steps were necessary to get the best art education that I could. This shaped my decision to study at New York Academy of Art and with Jacob Collins at the Water Street Atelier. A strong foundational training is incomparable in giving a young artist the training and

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concepts one needs to thrive.

WALKER: One wise instructor of mine often said that you are ready to be out there on your own when you know how to keep asking yourself all the right questions! A lifelong curiosity and love of seeing, the study of art history and my initial years of academic training have all provided me with a great foundation on which to build and grow as an artist. My ability to succeed as a realist artist was based on those years of disciplined education and subsequent teaching.

WHARTON: I think there are three aspects to being an artist in any discipline that we all have to come to terms with—meeting the technical demands of our medium, finding our artistic voice and learning how to live the life of an artist. The technical skills I have are the

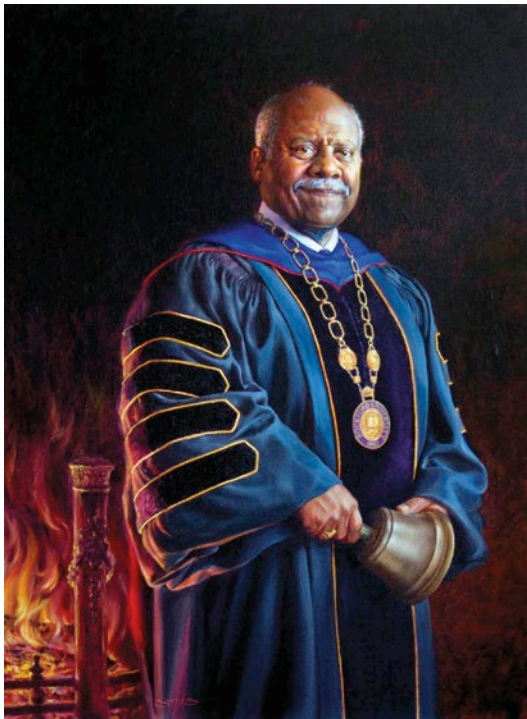
result of years of life drawing and painting, an enormous amount of plein air work, and copying pieces of great art. The pathway to developing an artistic voice is less clearly mapped out and for me, was more difficult. It really didn't come together until I had stopped studying and looking for direction from other artists, and instead found my own way, by paying closer attention to what fascinated me visually and emotionally.

ZHANG: The environment I grew up in had major influence on my artistic journey. My family lived on the campus of the art academy where my father was a professor, and I studied and eventually taught at the same college. I went on to the University of North Texas for the MFA degree, where I had the opportunity to study watercolor from professor Rob Erdle. An invaluable form of

my learning is visiting museums and galleries around the world, which allows me to study classic and contemporary arts up close.

EGNOSKI: What is the core message that you wish to communicate with your artwork and how has this evolved throughout your career?

BAIN: The overarching theme in my work has always been about beauty. However, as my artistic vocabulary continues to mature, I hope that my work reveals, more specifically, something deeper about the power of the human spirit and its inherent connection to a divine Creator. I hope to convey this theme of beauty in humanity by highlighting different facets of it: e.g. strength, passion, resilience, sensitivity, innocence, whimsy, vulnerability and so much more.

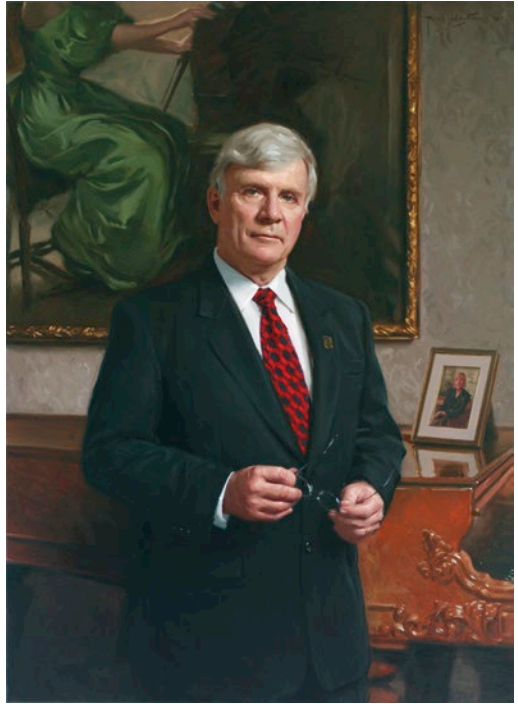


Evert Ploeg, *Self Portrait in Bathroom*, oil, 54 x 44" (137 x 112 cm)

William Suys, *Dr. Head*, oil, 44 x 32" (112 x 81 cm)



Gregory Mortenson, *Blue*, oil, 18 x 12" (46 x 30 cm)



Paul Newton, *President Benjamin*, oil, 50 x 36" (127 x 91 cm)

DESPANDE: Since the time when I first discovered John Singer Sargent's beautiful, lifelike portraits, I felt inspired to create paintings in a similar realistic, yet painterly style. Not only did I want to paint portraits, but I also wanted my paintings to contain a thought-provoking narrative. Through my work, I hope to express my appreciation for the nuances of life. In a moment captured on canvas, I emphasize the beauty in the dark and light, the hidden and visible, and the chaos and harmony.

HEIN: My painting process has become a significant part of what I value in my work. I believe a beautiful piece of furniture, made entirely with simple hand tools has added value over an identical piece done with sophisticated machines. Owning a piece of furniture like this is like owning a piece of its creator. I've chosen to work without cameras and computers in

my multi-figure paintings, despite the brutal challenge it poses for me. I feel a greater involvement and intimacy with the paintings that I've done without photos.

KRIMON: I admire portraits by Repin, Serov, Sargent, Zorn and so many others not because they capture the likeness of the sitter—that goes without saying. That's the craft. I don't know the sitters, so the actual likeness is irrelevant to me. Yes, it should be there, but there must be so much more than that. That something more is what I try to express in my portraits.

MORTENSON: I want my work to be well-crafted and structurally sound, and I want to feel a connection to it. I don't want to look back and see just a pretty painting, but to see a piece of me in it, to see a cross section of what was going on in my life at the time.

NEWTON: In my portraits, I try to capture something of the sitter's spirit on canvas—at least that is the ideal to which I aspire! I want my portraits to reflect the truth and human dignity of the sitter. While some direction of the sitter in terms of their pose is necessary, I'm keen not to overdo it. I want to give them their voice rather than impose my ideas upon them. If my work has evolved or changed over time it is hopefully a move in that direction.

PLOEG: As a tonal realist I believe my practice is not simply that of a portrait painter, but also that of a documentary maker. With each new portrait, I'm presented with the challenge of how I can best describe this person and tell their story in the oil paint medium. It's not enough for me to paint a mere likeness of the sitter; my objective, as I learn more about the person I am painting, is to convey our connection and conversations to the viewer.

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PONZIO: Sculpture is my language: it allows me to connect with people. It's a lengthy, cumbersome process that has consumed my life, and I'm grateful for it. This process has shown me a full range of emotions, triumphs and profound disappointments. It has made me feel alive. I hope my work reflects that. I hope it reveals that the artist felt empathy.

SUYS: My message derives from my commitment to paint from the soul, create works that stand the test of time and to continually improve. There are many thoughts that circulate in my head and heart when it comes to my work. A few consistent themes include "power and presence," "fall in love with the subject," and "make my subject a hero." I believe that the quality and depth of my communication will grow as my awareness and abilities improve.

TSENG: As an artist, I am also an observer. Over the years, I've tried to capture the places I have been to, the people around me and my environment. I like to capture true moments and translate those feelings onto the canvas. The human feeling has a temperature, sometimes warm or cool, that I like to show to the viewers.

WATWOOD: My artwork is primarily concerned with human presence. I'm deeply interested in why we are here, what makes us human and what is the beautiful complexity of human emotion that makes up our soul. My core message is "You matter to me"—the subjects of my artwork are human beings sharing their story and energy, and the figures I paint represent a narrative about the human experience of being alive here and now. This never stops fascinating me.

WALKER: I have lived my life as a citizen of the world and so I hope that my artwork speaks

to a universal sense of truth, beauty and timelessness. Great art somehow transcends the time in which it was created. As John Keats wrote 200 years ago, "Beauty is truth and truth beauty - that is all / Ye know on earth and all ye need to know." I find beauty in everything around me.

WHARTON: I don't think I have a message in the philosophical or narrative sense. Rather, I think of my paintings as windows to a

world of feeling and intuition. I visualize the experience with the viewer as something like a conversation between two close friends, where there is as much listening as speaking. If I had to say what I hope people take away from my paintings, it would be—slow down, open your heart, take time to see the people around you and be amazed at the beauty of this world.

ZHANG: I want to tell authentic stories and express honest emotions through my portraits.



**Hsin-Yao Tseng, *Green Door*,
oil, 16 x 12" (41 x 30 cm)**



Patricia Watwood, *Pandora*, oil, 30 x 26" (76 x 66 cm)

It's my belief that beauty is found among real people, in human interactions and under deep layers. Therefore, my paintings are all based on people discovered and recorded in interesting moments in real life.

EGNOSKI: What are the specific qualities that you strive for to make a portrait a strong piece of art?

BAIN: Over the years I've learned that a successful portrait is never "just a portrait." It should be a great design that can attract the viewer from across the room, regardless of subject matter. My goal is to highlight the model's personality, while leaving room for some mystery. I like to give my viewers room to create their own narratives within the

context of a portrait.

DESHPANDE: Careful observation and control of the lighting throughout a painting helps to make a strong portrait. To make a compelling work of art, I strive to capture the emotion and presence of the sitter.

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HEIN: I want my work to be meaningful to me. I used to paint for painting sake, but soon found that I was getting bored. So, I decided that I would focus on the two things that mean the most to me, God and family. This has really made a difference in the satisfaction I feel from painting.

KRIMON: The eyes should look at me and be alive, the skin should breathe—and the way to give life is not to meticulously copy the sitter. It's about designing and orchestrating all the elements to feed a specific idea of the work. Once you have that idea, you will develop the tools you need to fulfill that idea. It's about the movement within the piece—through all those elements—and that's when the piece starts to move me.

MORTENSON: I want each portrait to feel like it's captured a revelatory moment, something that is the essence of the person, but almost

taken for granted. For example, when you go on a date with your spouse and remember why you fell in love with her, or the conversation you have with your parents when you realize for the first time that they are not just your parents, but are people who have gone through similar problems that you are facing.

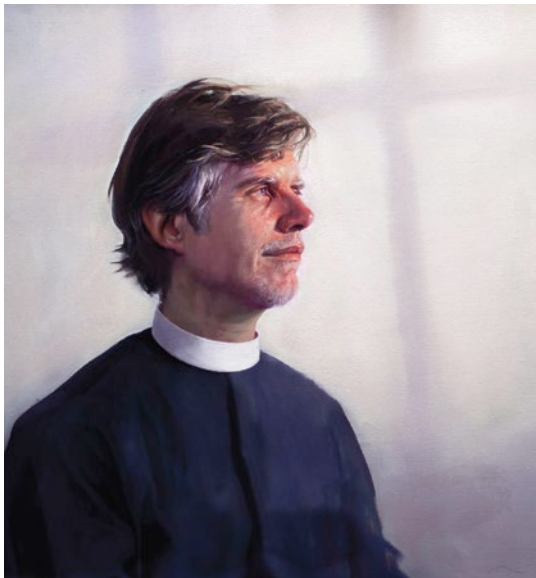
NEWTON: I strive in my portrait work to create a genuine connection with the viewer. I think that a portrait that resonates with the viewer, especially with those who know the sitter, produces the strongest work of art. When a sitter is captured in an authentic and uncompromising way and their humanity is revealed sympathetically but without flattery the result can be an arresting and powerful portrait.

PLOEG: I strive to convey a narrative, something that is unique and personal to the subject of my portrait. Also, I strive for a strong

composition with competent paint application. For me, I like to see brevity of brushwork, solid form and structure with a sculptural approach. But most of all, interest, excitement and character in the portrait that holds the viewer's attention and compels them to ask, "Who is this person?"

PONZIO: I try to bring life and character to a portrait. The suggestion of movement, tension or speech can animate a portrait. I study the physical aspect of the sitter to find the unique shapes that represent them. Though there are forms common to all faces, the expression of the forms is unique to each sitter. I find joy in these little differences that define our likeness. Above all, the portrait is a celebration of the sitter.

SUYS: For portraits, whether animal or human, I fall in love with the "beauty" of my subject. The meaning of beauty differs for each piece,



Thomas Wharton, *The Seeker-Portrait of Father Grant*, oil, 30 x 25" (76 x 64 cm)



Stephen Zhang, *Spitalfields*, watercolor, 41 x 31" (104 x 79 cm)



Alicia Ponzio, *The Letting Go*, bronze,
60 x 30 x 20" (152 x 76 x 51 cm)

but when I begin to sense it, that is when the portrait begins to truly come to life.

TSENG: A great portrait piece to me is to express the spirit of the person besides all the technical skills. Am I able to capture their character and personality? It's always better to have conversation with this person, get to know them before I jump into a painting.

WATWOOD: I want my paintings to have a feeling of connection—a sense of emotions and presence of mind that is shown in the subject and that connects with the viewer. I always think, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." For me, that "swing" is a feeling of aliveness and energy in the subject of the painting. I want to show the soul of the subject and remind the viewer of the energy of human connection and of their own soul—which is a beautiful thing.

WALKER: I always strive for my portraiture to have "wall power" as a work of art—a sense of monumentality through my use of light, value, color and design. This, along with the unique personality and character of each individual I paint, should capture the



John Seibels Walker, *The Hon. Costa Pleicones*, oil, 58 x 38" (147 x 97 cm)

viewer's attention and connect with them somehow, demanding that they engage with the painting and subject not only from afar, but also up close.

WHARTON: On a certain level, all portraiture is about likeness. The question is a likeness of what? That "what" for me is the appearance of the vivid presence of a person's personality. It's the kind of quality where you sense that the person in the portrait is lost in thought or perhaps about to speak. The range of

personalities is enormous, of course, and much of it is gradually revealed over time.

ZHANG: My painting process is a discovery of the person's story, personality and emotion, revealed through their face, hands and body. I am not interested in painting nice, empty faces or in technical perfection. To me, a successful work should viscerally connect with viewers and evoke deep empathy. I think Rembrandt's portraits are among the best created in this tradition. [L&L](#)