

A Christmas Portrait

By Carl Nelson

Just about fifty years ago my college career was drawing to a close, (I hoped.) And my dream, if I could have described it, would have been to have lived in a small studio on the edge of town – out on a prairie (somewhere) – where I would live and paint. Just making paintings – I had no idea of what. But I would need a place to live and work and money to eat.

To pursue my desire, I decided I needed to lower and stabilize my living costs. I liked an investment, so instead of leasing the ‘raw space’ of a loft, (I lived in Seattle), I decided I would buy a home. My top price was fifteen thousand. But I wasn’t looking for nice. Rather I searched for something decrepit enough that it could be repurposed without the loss of much value. And I found my candidate in a repossessed, fixer-upper, in the culturally mixed area of Southeast Seattle. Say whatever you want about minorities, but they keep the prices down. And this place was packed with everybody, plus arguments and nighttime gunshots. Anyway, I succeeded in lowering my living costs to house payments of around \$103/month. And my studio was as big as the number of walls I decided to knock out.

I wanted to make a living from my art. It didn’t need to be grand, but I wanted that sense of moving forward and relishing each day. (Forget marriage and having kids for far.... in the future.) Drawing portraits seemed like it would fill the bill. I’d watched others seemingly make a living at it. Flattery and narcissism have given employment down through the ages and it hasn’t stopped yet! I liked figure drawing, did it twice weekly, the face included. Moreover I thought I could bring something to it, as they say. All I needed was a public.

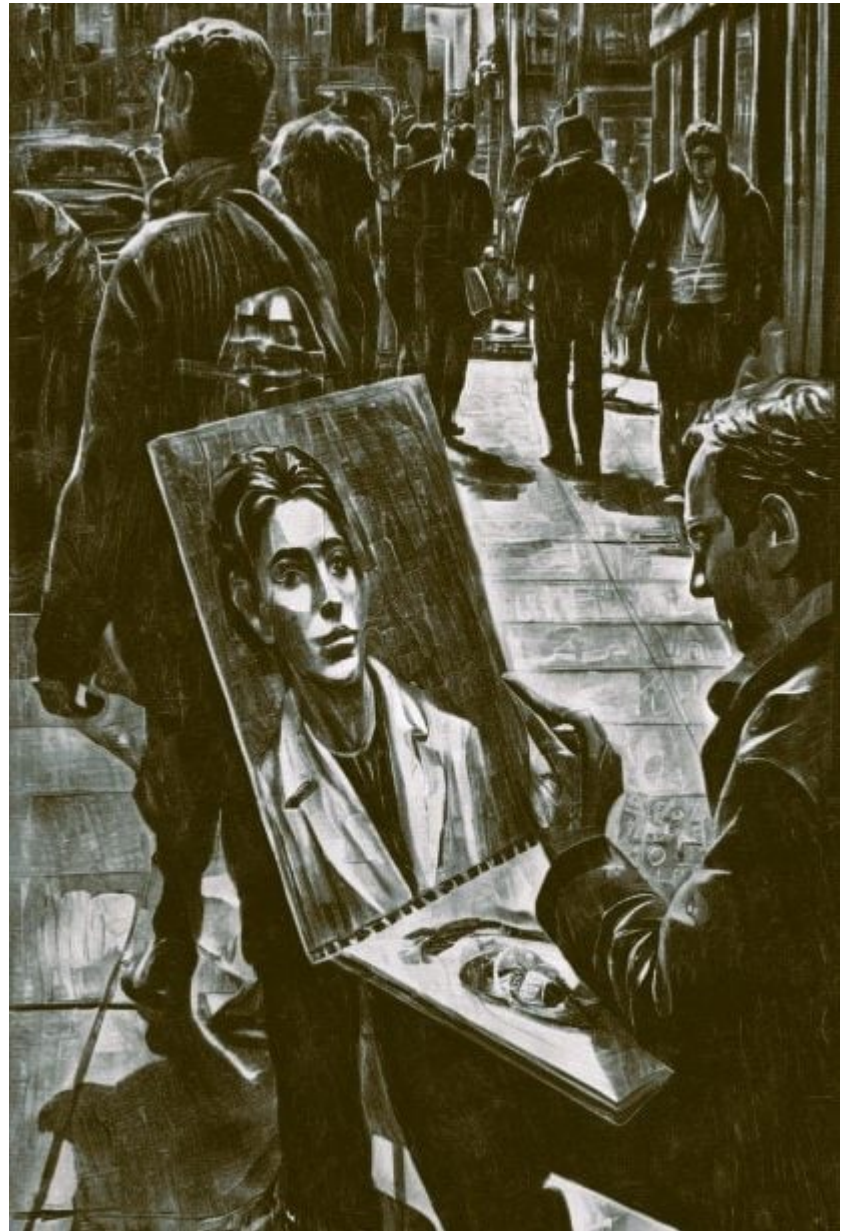
The beach at Alki was wonderfully public and I found a spot to

pitch my easel in the sand. The scene was seemingly untouched by competitors and with bikinis to admire! I soon found out why. Portrait hawking was illegal there.

Eventually, I ended up at the Pike Street Market. The Pike Street Farmers' Market is where a lot of artisans ended up. For around \$3.50/day you could rent about 4 feet of counter space to show off your wares to a seemingly endless flow of people. Romantically perched on the hillside just above the waterfront with all of its activities, smells and sounds, the Marketplace was outdoors and cramped, but it had the crowds milling about down long walkways of lighted stalls, livened by a level of browsing and haggling with all of the buskers and idlers a carnival atmosphere will attract. It was all rather like an informal musical.

You had to show up early, around 7am, while they were

shoveling and taking fish from the fish mongers, because that was when the stall placements were meted out. After which you'd set up and maybe go in for coffee at either Lowells or the Athenian (breakfast, if you were making money) until the crowds arrived. You'd walk past the alcoholics at the bar setting up for their first drink of the day. As one of my friends there related, when the alcoholics arranged themselves upon their stools at opening light, they would drape a bar towel across their neck so that with one hand they could guide their other hand with their shaking drink to their mouths, so as not to lose a drop. After the day's work, we'd put our stuff away and have a beer ourselves. (Again, if we'd made any money.)



Unfortunately, I *wasn't* making any money to speak of, and as November arrived it was getting damned cold. I dressed warmer. I stood on cardboard. I cut the ends out of my mitten fingers. But I was getting tired of passing the time. When you're not making any money, there really isn't a lot left to say. You're not in the mood to talk. You're glum.

I tried come-ons. I offered to draw just the nose (or an ear)

for a quarter, two eyes for fifty cents. I even cut out little framing mats to place them in, wrapped nicely in cellophane. I sold only one nose – to a fellow, who nevertheless went away smiling. He seemed to like his nose. But still, not much paid business. So I started looking around.

A bright spot was the playing of the metal kettle drums. That particular metallic banging carried down the Market concourse and out into the street – then seemed to echo and return until the cold air was a jumble of hovering notes. Suffering heightens the aesthetics, at times. The world, at times, never seems as beautiful as when you are poor and cold; something like the beauty of winter, I suppose.

But I decided to settle for less beauty with the chance of making more money. So I made my way uptown to the department stores, where I found myself in the office of the Manager of the Bon Marche (now Macys). I pitched him and showed him my portraits. When I think of encounters with people I've liked, a large percentage of them have been businessmen. They tend to be honest and decent. They're tough, but then it's very hard to be decent in this world without being tough. Anyway, I liked this fellow. And I think he liked me, for some reason. We agreed on a percentage and hours and he took me to a spot in the lamp department at the head of the escalator on the 5th floor, which he thought would do. (Later, I'd seen they'd even made up some posters for publicity.)

No matter where you are in this life, if you just sit still, you'll see a lot. If you sit in a department store, you'll see how mobile all of the merchandise is. "If merchandise does not start moving within the first half hour that it is placed out there, it is either moved or replaced," Mr. Smith had said as we toured the store on our way up the escalators. And I witnessed this, as I sat there through the Christmas rush. My goodness, the whole place was in Brownian motion.

And, if you sit doing portraits at the head of an escalator,

you'll get an idea of how dangerous they can be also. They would eat shoes, rubbers. Children's' small fingers and mittens could get caught in the moving handrail, where it curved at the top of escalator to return. There was an emergency button to stop the escalator which someone closest must rush to press.

But it wasn't like I sat still and waited for things to happen. I changed my display samples. I saw that sensitive pencil drawings just weren't going to make it. I saw that what sold were drawings with 'punch'. So I upgraded to charcoal. And line-shading, (such as the Masters employed) was risky, as much as I loved it. It was hard to do correctly. Moreover, a public portrait artist has quite a bit of surface to cover in 20 minutes. And it was the bigger the better, for pricing. And there is nothing like smudged charcoal to cover that ground. So, much as I detested it, I began smudging my charcoal – then discovered that the smudge sticks of rolled paper work like fattened pencils. Sometimes a compromise bends your way. Then I added a conte crayon line. I worshipped the drawings of Michelangelo and Da Vinci, and conte seemed as close as I would get to pencil with a 'punch'.

Also, I noticed that customers are attracted by *other* customers. So I would always try to either be busy drawing from a photo, or I would see a face I liked and cajole them into sitting for me. Unfortunately, it seemed the rule that whoever had an interesting face, judged themselves to be ugly. A portrait held no appeal. And those who judged themselves good-looking were almost invariably uninteresting – you could almost hear the pencil yawn and the eraser sigh.

Still, things moved slowly.

I'd thought that perhaps my prices were too high. So, I had discount prizes. I would draw a face, smudge it over – and then offer, at *half-price!*, a portrait to whoever could name the famous person that it was. ("No. It's not Mr. Ed.")

And they usually won! Hooray! “You are very clever!” (Have a seat!)

Then, considering I might attract some willing to hazard a pittance, I again tried selling just ‘a nose’ for 75 cents, or ear for 50 (indoor pricing). And I still offered them with the cutest little frames, I thought.

Still, as things remained pretty slack, I took any sort of work customers offered. As Moliere used to admonish his troupe (to paraphrase a bit), “When the King wants to see a performance, you don’t tell him you’re not ready.” So I drew from small and poorly lit snapshots. I drew pets.

A lady brought me a two by two inch poorly lit snapshot of her shaggy dog, standing against the wind, with its hair being blown backwards. The only identifying features, besides all of the yarn-like hair, were three dots. Two suggested eyes, the other a nose. A magnifying glass got me that far. But for the rest of the fifteen dollars I had to invent a lot of dog.

I drew babies... Most babies’ features are near identical. Their expressions are fleeting. In fact, whatever they do is fleeting. The key to recognition is in accurately recording the distance between their significant features: such as the eyes, the nose-eyes-mouth triangles, and how far off are their ears? Their mother’s brains are built like airport scanners that can pick the terrorist from a million other faces. “That’s not him! That’s not my baby. That doesn’t look like my baby!” (Well, what part of it do you think *does*?) What I’d do for fifteen dollars!

I had to watch the jokes. *Don’t* tell a sweet little girl, “You move, and I’ll punch you.” The mother’s gasp, just behind me, seemingly sucked all of the air from the room.

As I’ve aged I’ve realized that some people have charisma and attract a crowd – and some don’t. I’m in the latter group. It was said of the famous modern mathematician (Godel) that he

was “anti-charismatic”. He once voiced the answer – in the midst of a mathematical society meeting – to a conundrum which had eluded mathematicians for 2,000 years. But his reply was ignored in the hubbub of other voices.

I’m not maintaining that *my* anti-charisma is on that level. But I *would* say that when I speak ...around two sentences in, people lose interest. By three sentences I pretty much have to step around to block their exit. But, whereas the generally public is not enamored of me, I do seem to click with and attract oddballs of every weft and warp. We’re like lint and you can often find us all glommed together like in a dryer filter, or singly like those pill balls on sweaters.

Nice things did happen. A lot of people left very pleased that you’d noticed the same special quality about their loved one that they knew. Some felt you’d done an ‘honest assessment’. And some thought the chin was too long. (Actually, the nose was too short.) The best were younger children with dark hair and dark eyes. You couldn’t miss. And it was fun to observe their silence, or engage their chatter. And I didn’t worry too much if they moved a bit. Most humans (and animals) repeat the same gestures. Patience worked. I just had to be sure to finish in around twenty minutes. Otherwise, it could become a tedious experience.

The only exception to this were the pretty young women who would sit for their portrait, draw you into conversation and then ask, with a rather demur turn to their voice and a slight quiver to their eyelid: “Have you ever drawn women nude?” This can be a fringe benefit you encounter as a portrait artist. The first time I snapped my charcoal pencil lead.

Like any young man, most of the women I met were on the job. One was a psychologist: “I don’t think that you can actually produce the quality of portrait you have on display in the twenty minutes you have to do them in,” she suggested in a rather tangential manner so as not to come down too hard on me.

I appreciated that. And I didn't argue with her. I also didn't say that anyone who won't cheat or steal a little for their art, probably hasn't the balls to get anywhere. The last conversation I remember having with her, she insisted I was depressed. I told her I didn't think I was depressed; that I was just feeling the way it was. You don't understand she said, "Depression is a very, serious disease."

Well, I would agree with her partly there. Art is a *very, serious disease*. This is probably why parents become so concerned when they detect signs of it in their loved ones. And there was the police officer who I went out with for a drink. "Well," she said, "if it's not working out for you, you can always do something else." You go silent as an artist when you hear that. 'It doesn't work like that,' I thought.

A thought that slowly dawns on you as an artist is that most of the way you experience the world and/or 'feel', is illegal. In the eyes of normal people, you are not simply describing failure and how it feels – you are suffering from a *very, serious disease*.

I finally happened upon someone though, who it seemed I connected with. And it happened through the first (and only) blind date I had ever arranged for *myself*.

One day I was finishing up a portrait of some ...little girl, I imagine. A small crowd had gathered. And as the girl rose to claim her drawing I heard this high pitched squeal from behind: "Oh! Would you draw *me*?!!"

I turned. And there was Miss Piggy. A pretty tall! Miss Piggy, in a big pink foam head and flannel costume and, of course, with those long flowing blonde locks, batting eyelashes... and lovely round nose. She had me from hello. "Sure," I said. "Sit yourself down."

"Oh goody," she replied.

I started on the portrait and made a show of needing a much larger piece of paper.

She stayed in character. I imagine we traded in Sesame Street gossip. But as the crowd dissipated and I finished up – we made a date to meet at the base of the escalator when she got off around seven, (as I remember).

It was a delight and surprise to find I'd just made myself a date with a tall, healthy, good-looking, honey-haired blonde who looked a lot like Candice Bergen. Turns out she was a highly intelligent, down on her luck professional tennis player who happened to have ended up broke in Seattle after losing one too many matches... and latched onto the first job she could find.

We attended the theater. I believe I cooked dinner for her once. She spent a day visiting with a famous young woman tennis player she'd coached who came to town during the Virginia Slims tournament. (Have I remembered that right? Did a cigarette company actually promote a tennis tournament?) And going broke trying to do something seemed the most natural thing in the world to her.

Then she travelled on. The last word I had from her, she was teaching tennis on some island in the Caribbean. (I hope her life went well.)

But they don't call it the Christmas Rush for nothing. You get down to those last few days and the shoppers become like desperate fish, which will bite on anything. They are literally tossing their money at you. And my business picked up too!

Time was money, and I'd never worked so hard. You have to make hay while the hay is making. And I worked hard right up to the night of Our Saviour's Birth.

By late afternoon, Christmas Eve, I was emotionally exhausted.

At the drawing group I attended we had a curious Chinese fellow who would check the models proportions with a measuring tape. We'd be drawing away as he pulled his carpenter's tape out. Then, when he got the measurement he needed, he left the tape to recoil with a "*snap!*"

I didn't draw like that. I judged the proportions – and everything else – by feel. And by mid-afternoon Christmas Eve I was too exhausted to feel. ...*totally* numb. I had no idea what I was doing. I still knew where I was. But I would look out at a face; then look at the easel without any insight or recognition whatsoever. I was moving the pencil, but I was moving by rote; winging it on a hope and a prayer. You don't turn down money. So I soldiered on.

The store was closing when my very last customer appeared. He was a disheveled, quite drunk, pudgy, thirty-something year old male with a very red nose. "I want you to draw my portrait," he said. I helped him to sit.

He said he had been walking for hours (probably from bar to bar) and just couldn't figure out what to give his parents for Christmas. Then, he happened by my display when it hit him! That what they would like would be a portrait of *him*.

I nodded, as I drew, as if that were very thoughtful.

But for the life of me I couldn't feel what the hell I was doing. So he finally decided he would give me some help by stepping around the easel.

"The nose is too small," he said. This is very funny. Because the cynical definition of a portrait is, "a painting in which the nose is too large". (I believe Whistler said that.)

I worked on. He slumped where he sat. Time passed, until finally even *he* was becoming restless and/or nodding off.

"You about done?" He said.

"Just another minute or so," I answered, softly. I kept working but I just couldn't get a reading on whether or not it was right.

He awoke again: "Because I have somewhere to *be*."

I was reminded of the time in medical school when I lost a hooked needle in the bloody scalp of a drunk. When you stitch a bloody scalp laceration, you're never supposed to let go of one end of the needle with the clamp, until you have the other end securely clamped. So how could I screw up? I don't know. But after a loud, drunken interrogation about what was "*taking so looong? Do you know what the fuck you're doing!*" echoing through the ER, I still couldn't find the needle. While sweat was soaking my shirt, the intern finally bailed me out.

I looked around. To my surprise, all of the lights in the store had been turned out, and we sat within the one lamp which illuminated him, and the one drawing lamp which illuminated my easel. Just on the perimeter of the light I heard a 'whimpering'? I squinted further and there were three Dobermans standing patiently in choke collars about the perimeter, backed by their handlers in black leather jackets who were doing a last sweep of the store. "Are you going to be much longer," the most authoritative one of them asked me. (With remarkable deference, I thought at the time – to my 'artistic needs'!)

"No. I think I'm done right now," I said. I presented the drawing to my 'customer'. He looked it over. Said thank you, as if however it looked, I had solved a big problem for him. He paid me and left. And I packed up and left immediately after.

I rode the #7 Metro bus home that Christmas Eve with about half a bus load of other non-committal passengers; just a portion of the left-out people of this world, not late for anything or needing to be anywhere. I walked to my house and

scooped up some dinner from the crock pot meal I had left simmering all day. I sat in my bare living room in my one overstuffed chair and footstool, with my two cats layered on my legs for warmth, and watched the many colored lights on my jade plant twinkle. One strand of indoor lights will go 'round and 'round a tiny jade plant. And it shone brightly as a burning bush.