

An aerial photograph of a winter mountain landscape. The scene is dominated by snow-covered evergreen trees. A dark, winding path or stream cuts through the snow in the middle ground. At the bottom of the frame, a dark asphalt road with white dashed lines is visible, with a few small cars driving on it.

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# BEST FACE FORWARD

Imbued with character, a painting captures more than the moment, which may be why people are increasingly turning their back on the selfie to have their likenesses caught on canvas. // By Josh Sims

**“IT’S CONFSSIONAL**, and rare that you come away from the experience without knowing each other in an intimate way. How do they use their face? What mannerisms do they have? How do they appear in different light?” says Frances Bell. “And all the time you don’t want to poison the well of goodwill by boring them either. But it’s rare that people are bored. Most enjoy the experience because it’s just so unusual.”

What could such an experience be? For all that we live in an image-saturated, selfie-taking, camera-mediated world, Bell is referring to having one’s portrait painted. As an artist and member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters in the UK she is well versed both in capturing an individual’s likeness but also, when necessary, in converting reluctant sitters.

“Sometimes they have been given the opportunity to have their portrait painted as a gift,” Bell explains. “Sometimes the portrait is for an institution of some kind, so you have to capture both the person and their role. But for many others it’s not because they have a vain streak so much as because they love art and love portraiture.”

Certainly the Royal Society’s portrait commissioning service—now 40 years old—is busier than ever, connecting its 50 or so artists to those who want to be immortalised in oils. Contrary to portraiture’s image—historically as a means of commemorating the great and the good, as a form of status signalling and power play—sitters today come from all walks of life. They also come with all manner of incentives: To mark an important milestone in life, or a special relationship, as part of a family’s artistic legacy (or to kick-start one), even to memorialize a deceased relative, having them painted from old photographs.

Indeed, while Bell is among those artists who insist that their subjects spend time physically in their presence for at least some hours—traveling to them if necessary—others will work solely from virtual meetings and photos, which is also opening up the service to new markets.

Sitter and painter must be well matched not just in temperament but in aesthetic too. While most painters may be able to turn their brush to a more classical or a more modernist style, to traditional or more radical composition, most are

THE ARTIST  
Portrait painter  
Frances Bell.



DILLON BRIDEN

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Martina Merelli of the Federation of British Artists and Mall Galleries

sought out for their distinct approach and ideas. When the portrait artist Michael Shane Neal painted U.S. Congressman John Lewis, for example, the politician and campaigner noted during his sittings that there remained much work in the civil rights realm yet to be done.

“He told me that ‘There is work still unfinished,’” recalls Neal. “Moved by his words, I ultimately came up with a concept that departed from my normal style. I intentionally left some areas of his finished portrait unfinished as a symbol of the Congressman’s words. Pushing the envelope

for me stretched my imagination and helped me create something unique in my work.”

“It’s important to show any sitter the artist’s works and leave them to think what they do and don’t like, how far they are happy for the artist to push things,” explains Martina Merelli, of the Federation of British Artists and Mall Galleries, who manages the process for the Royal Society, connecting the painter and the to-be-painted. “We act as middlemen and matchmakers, since clients can sometimes be shy about discussing certain matters direct with the artist—what they



COURTESY MARK LOVETT

might and might not like, how to get what they want, the process, even practical details like how quickly a portrait can be done [typically, four months is fast] and, of course, how much it will cost [from around £3,000 to the sky’s the limit]. But, ultimately this is a process of collaborating with an artist and a particular artistic vision.”

That means the resulting painting can, says Merelli, sometimes come as a surprise to the subject, revealing aspects of form and character that, by turns, might be revelatory, or initially strike them as a touch too honest. As the Maryland, U.S.-based portrait painter Mark Lovett stresses, a portrait is a reflection of that artist’s insight. “A portrait is a collaborative process,” he says. “I want to honor the subject because having a portrait painted is an expensive and often time-consuming process. But I also feel that a good portrait should give you the sense you’re with that person, that in some sense you see into them and make a human connection. Portraiture really is a unique medium in that way.”

It’s the artist’s insight, discernment, and perception that, in fact, takes the portrait beyond the merely photographic, agrees Christine Egnoski, executive director of the Portrait Society of America, which has seen its membership increase tenfold to 4,000 over the past 25 years. “While instant foods, for comparison, can certainly be delicious, a meal lovingly and painstakingly prepared provides a much higher degree of interpretation and individuality,” she says. “Often the point of a well-conceived portrait is to convey more than just an exact likeness, but to capture a moment, a feeling, a mood or a passion—something that conveys a deeper meaning. That’s why interest in portraiture remains so high—because portraits reveal other qualities and offer the viewers a more real sense of the person’s presence.”

So just how does it feel to have one’s presence committed to canvas? How does it feel to be studied so intently, to undergo a kind of psychoanalysis by way of pigment? Intimidating? Liberating? “I embraced it—and the idea of coming under that level of scrutiny,” says Will Cappelletti, a U.S.-based business consultant and art collector, who was recently painted by Frances Bell.

“When the idea of having my portrait done was first suggested I laughed—it seemed so self-aggrandizing. I mean, the kind of people I know with portraits all run major departments of the U.S. government,” he adds. “But on reflection, I came to see the experience as something to tick off the bucket list, and as a way of getting to know myself better. Besides, we live in a world of impermanence, such that no single image stands out as special. But a portrait really does.”



COURTESY MICHAEL SHANE NEAL



COURTESY FRANCES BELL

THE PORTRAITS  
Michael Shane Neal’s “unfinished” painting of John Lewis; “Lily,” by Frances Bell.

Facing page: Mark Lovett captures the Piasecki children of Charlotte, Virginia on canvas.