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Everett Raymond Kinstler
Master Portrait Painter

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SITTING COMFORTABLY in the ante-chamber of Everett Raymond Kinstler’s Gramercy Park studio in Manhattan, I felt an overwhelming sense of the significance of the place and its current inhabitant’s contribution to the art world. After all, we were in not only an historic New York City landmark, the National Arts Club, but also the former studio of the American Impressionist and prominent teacher Frank Vincent DuMond (1865–1951). What’s more, this is the studio where Kinstler had painted what amounts to a pictorial who’s who of over 2,000 portraits, including those of Tony Bennett, Katharine Hepburn, Tom Wolfe, count- less business leaders, more than 50 U.S. Cabinet members and seven U.S. presidents. Like a kid in a candy store, I scoured the place, taking everything in.

A 70-year career has taken Everett Raymond Kinstler from inking cartoons to illustrating books and magazines to painting thousands of portraits of America’s most celebrated.

brush with HISTORY

BY LOUISE B. HAFESH

LEFT: Avon Books had asked Kinstler to create a cover illustration for the detective novel The General Died at Dawn, which was based on a 1936 movie of the same name. Avon never used the illustration but, in 2012, the painting, Untitled (Couple) (ca 1958; oil, 18x14), became the cover of the catalogue for his retrospective exhibition, “Pulps to Portraits.”

ABOVE: Intimate Confessions #4 (1952; pen and ink, 17½x13½) is one of hundreds of illustrations Kinstler created during his six-year association with Avon Comics.
“Not a day goes by,” says Kinstler, “that I don’t think of Mr. Dumond, who was my teacher at the Art Students League.” It was at that school that Kinstler himself would later teach full time from 1969 to 1974 and give weekend workshops through 2010. “I loved the old man,” continues Kinstler. “He used to call me his ‘boy’ and, taking me under his wing, helped secure my first studio at the National Arts Club. After his death, I moved into his larger space (above).”

And what a space it is! Bright and airy (20x30 feet) with an 18-foot ceiling, one entire wall of north-lit windows plus a grand balcony that stretches across another wall. Paintings, sketches and photographs lie scattered about, along with an eclectic assortment of props and resources, including an impressive private library and a life-sized seated mannequin affectionately known as Ms. Draper (bequeathed to the studio by portraitist William F. Draper, 1912–2003). To the right of Kinstler’s easel (originally owned by another mentor and friend, the illustrator James Montgomery Flagg, 1877–1960), a simple chair rests on a worn platform, while a hand-carved wooden screen is flanked on

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**Materials**

**Canvas:** New York Central Art Supply #90 SP (single-primed) linen on Jack Richeson Best stretchers

**Brushes:** Silver Brush Everett Raymond Kinstler Series—Kinstler’s most commonly used brushes are bristle filberts, sizes 2–12.

**Paint:** Jack Richeson oils—sap green, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, burnt umber, burnt sienna, alizarin crimson, cadmium red light, raw sienna, cadmium yellow, ivory black and white

**Mediums:** Kinstler Studio painting medium (very fluid; good for beginning stages, such as sketching and blocking in) and Kinstler alkyd oil painting medium (a thicker medium that expedites drying of the paint; used for glazing, detailing and other processes as the painting progresses); Kinstler directed the formulations of both mediums, which were developed through experimentation.
the right by a taboret on which rests John Singer Sargent’s actual palette. “That was a gift bequeathed to me from the New Jersey painter Paul Burns (1910–1990),” says Kinstler. “It had been part of Sargent’s estate sale in 1925.”

Having already discovered that every nook and cranny holds some treasure and an opportunity for a personal anecdote, I try to appear nonchalant about this last revelation. I comment on a small, striking painting of Katharine Hepburn (whom Kinstler had painted more than 40 times in the 1980s and 1990s). Kinstler confided that, at her sittings, the actress had insisted on overseeing every detail, dictating incessant instructions, often to Kinstler’s exasperation. “I finally said to her, ‘Ms. Hepburn, I admire you so much, but your constant critiques are driving me crazy,’” recalls Kinstler. “She thought for a second and then said, ‘You know what your problem is? You talk too much!’” When that particular portrait was complete, Hepburn declared (to Kinstler’s surprise) that it was her favorite and told the artist, “I like you—you do your homework.”

BELOW: Katherine Hepburn (ca 1987, oil, 46x46), one of many portraits Kinstler painted of the actress, is part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.
Two Takes on Tom Wolfe

Kinstler’s friendship with Tom Wolfe began in 1964. At that time, Kinstler was painting astronaut Scott Carpenter and Wolfe was writing his novel about America’s first space travelers, *The Right Stuff*. Kinstler first painted Wolfe in 1987 (at right). Then, in 2000, Kinstler revisited the subject (below). Of the second *Tom Wolfe*, Kinstler says, “I challenged myself to paint Tom in his characteristic white suit against a stark white background.” This “white” portrait is part of the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

From Pulp to Portraits

My visit with Kinstler took place a week after the opening of “Pulps to Portraits,” the artist’s 2012 exhibition at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, a retrospective that explored how illustration had shaped the artist’s work and influenced his transition into portraiture. Still riding high from that celebration, he and I discussed his reaction to seeing his life’s work showcased in a significant place and in such a comprehensive way.

“I feel a little like a Dickens character who’s transported by the ghosts of past and present and gets to view everything from a different perspective,” Kinstler said with a laugh. “It’s odd but quite rewarding to look back on a career that spans more than 70 years and see the progression of the work.”

Time travel aside, it’s been quite a ride for the Manhattan-born artist who left school at age 16 to take a job drawing comic books, magazine illustrations and paperback book covers. His magazine and comic contributions, including the first *Zorro* comics and illustrations for the pulp magazine, *The Shadow*, are often credited with influencing the Pop art school—a point reinforced by Roy Lichtenstein, who once told the artist, “You were Pop art before it even existed.”
As an inker’s apprentice in the 1950s, Kinstler completed 180 comic strip panels each week. He credits this early work with helping him attract freelance pulp book and magazine assignments as well as honing his ability to tell a story visually, a skill he put to good use in his portraits. “When I began illustrating, I wasn’t aware that the field was disappearing,” he says. “Culture was changing, photography was taking over, television was coming in and magazines were folding. And with the market and business starting to decline, I had to think differently.”

ABOVE: Kinstler painted *John Wayne* (1978; oil, 44x34) from life for the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. *The Saturday Evening Post* picked up the portrait as an August 1979 cover illustration.
Out of necessity, the young illustrator began to look for more viable outlets for his art. “Painting people was always what I enjoyed most,” Kinstler explains, “so making the transition into portraiture was a natural shift.” Suffice to say, portraiture was also something he was exceptionally gifted at. Signing on with Portraits, Inc., a gallery that specializes in securing portrait commissions, he soon established himself as one of America’s top portrait painters.

“It’s been stimulating to paint people,” he says. “I’m a storyteller; that’s my journey. What I value most are imagination, feeling and the skill to communicate—those qualities have always been the measure for me,” says Kinstler, who ranks capturing a person’s essential character above all else. “Painting a convincing portrait is not always about getting a likeness,” he says. “Naturally, that helps, but often it’s about getting a point of view.” To that end, he recommends doing advance life studies, pointing out that spending time with the subject to get a sense of what he or she is like, looking for significant characteristics and being selective about certain traits—along with sincerity and passion for what you’re doing—are integral to the process.

Generally Kinstler works from life, although he does take photographs for secondary reference. He begins on a bluish-gray toned canvas and, once his model is posed to conform to preliminary sketches, places a few rough indicators for composition before delving directly into painting alla prima. “I feel a responsibility to capture both the spirit and likeness of the people I paint, and so I prefer my sitters to be animated rather than motionless,” he says. “Carrying on a lively conversation as I work helps. In so doing, I also get to see other facets of my subject that I can perhaps incorporate into the portrait.”

Concluding our visit, Kinstler remarked: “I was recently asked an intriguing question:
‘If you could paint anyone in the world, who would that be?’ Almost immediately,” says Kinstler, “names like Sir Laurence Olivier and Winston Churchill came to mind—mostly people who were or are larger than life. After further thought, though, I realized my subjects are not just well-known personalities, but rather people from all walks of life. And since everyone in his or her own way has a story and what I most enjoy about the process is capturing the essence of a person’s character, you could say that I’m already painting the very people whose essences I most want to interpret!”

Louise B. Hafesh is an award-winning artist and writer and a contributing editor for The Artist’s Magazine. You can see examples of her work at www.louisebhafesh.com and www.paintersportal.blogspot.com.

Meet Everett Raymond Kinstler

Everett Raymond Kinstler, who dropped out of high school and abandoned a formal art education to take a job inking comic books, has been awarded honorary doctorates from Rollins College (1983), outside Orlando, Florida; Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts (2002), in Old Lyme, Connecticut; and the Academy of Art University (2010), in San Francisco. For five decades he taught at the Art Students League of New York. Kinstler has painted seven United States presidents from life, and his paintings of President Ronald Reagan and President Gerald R. Ford are official White House portraits. Kinstler’s work is part of the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, among others. The Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery has acquired more than 100 pieces of his works and, in 1999, awarded Kinstler the Copley Medal, its highest honor. Visit his website at www.everettraymondkinstler.com.