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ART



Alice Neel  
Painting Portraits



SCHOLASTIC

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**COVER:** Alice Neel (1900-1984). *Hartley* (detail), 1966. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36 in. Photograph © 2001, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Arthur M. Bullowa, for the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art.

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# Capturing Soul



**Alice Neel was one of the most important portrait artists of the 20th century.**

Alice Neel disliked being called a "portraitist" or portrait artist. To her, this sounded too commercial. Instead, this American artist called herself a "collector of souls." Neel believed that each person has an "essential core" of personality, and this is what she tried to bring out in her portraits.

Neel was born in Philadelphia in 1900, but her family soon moved to a small Pennsylvania town where Neel's father worked as a railroad clerk. The artist once recalled that the town had no artists and writers. "There was nothing to stimulate my mind except my mother." Neel's mother, who was intelligent and well-read, was not particularly interested in art, and she had very traditional views of womanhood. "I don't know what you expect to do in the world," she told Alice. "You're a girl."

Perhaps this is why Alice Neel kept her artistic ambitions a secret. From early childhood, Neel wanted to be an artist. But she told no one of her dream. Because her family had little money, rather than studying art in high school, Neel took typing and stenography. Following a series of office jobs, Neel won a scholarship to the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, graduating at 25.

In 1924, Neel married a young Cuban artist. They lived in Cuba, then moved to New York City. The three-part watercolor portrait *The Family* (right), done when the artist was 27, depicts a visit to her parents' house with her daughter. Mother and baby are completely isolated from the surrounding



**The composition of this early work visually suggests Alice Neel's relationship with her children and her own parents. (Neel and her baby are in the center panel.)**

*The Family*, 1927. Watercolor, 14 1/2 x 9 3/4 in. © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. Private Collection.

# S

**This is a portrait of Neel's daughter-in-law and first grandchild. Does the mother seem comfortable holding the baby? Does the baby look happy?**

*Mother and Child (Nancy and Olivia), 1967. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 36 in. © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. Private Collection.*



**“When I talk to a person before painting them, they unconsciously assume their most characteristic pose. They show me what the world has done to them and their response.”—Alice Neel**

activity. No one communicates as Neel's mother frantically scrubs the floor, her father hauls a bucket of coal, and her brother studies alone in his room. After her first child died and her husband left her, Neel suffered a breakdown and was hospitalized for several months.

When Neel had recovered, she was offered a job as an artist for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a government agency that created jobs during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Over the next two decades, Neel worked in poverty, relatively unknown. Her life was often disrupted by destructive relationships with men, one of whom destroyed many of her paintings. Neel had two more children, both sons.

Neel's haunting portrait work eventually gained the attention of the art world. From the 1950s on, her work appeared in many museums and exhibitions.

Throughout her life, Neel painted portraits filled with keen psychological insights of her family and friends. Compare the mother and child in the work above with the mother and child in her early work *The Family*. The same wavering lines reveal both young mothers' uncertainty. In the later work, the woman's crouching form alone reveals her psychological state. She leans toward one side of the canvas, clutching her child and staring out with frightened eyes. Alice Neel died in New York City in 1984, at the age of 84.

# Growing Up on Canvas

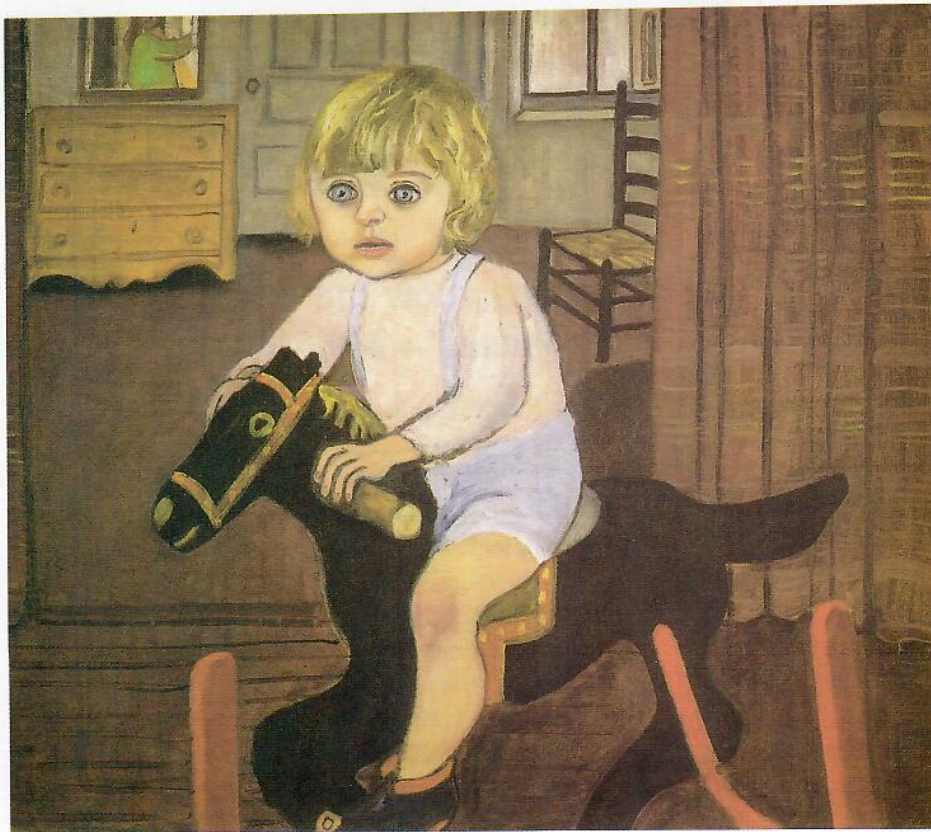
“The hardest thing for me to accept is change. You can get relative security, but everything keeps changing, especially children.” —**Alice Neel**

**D**uring the 1940s, Alice Neel lived in New York City with her two young sons, Richard and Hartley. She painted portraits of her neighbors, especially the black and Hispanic children who lived nearby. Even when Neel painted family members and close friends, she did not flatter her subjects. Instead, the artist sought to convey their insecurities, disappointments, and discomfort as part of the “whole person.”

Neel wanted one of her sons to be a classical pianist and the other to become a ballet dancer. Instead, one became a lawyer, the other a doctor. These portraits show Neel’s younger son, Hartley, at different stages in his life. They reflect the artist’s developing style and her changing relationship with her children.

In *Hartley on the Rocking Horse* (left), the boy is a wide-eyed toddler at the beginning of his life. **Light pastel colors** highlight the untouched innocence of the child, who stands out against the apartment’s dark background. The **horizontal format** suggests the stability of his relationship with his mother. The furniture and curtains **frame** and protect the small figure. Reflected in a mirror over the dresser is a tiny self-portrait of Neel painting, which adds to the self-contained feeling of her world.

Over 20 years later, in *Hartley*, 1966 (right, above), we see Neel’s son at 25. The artist painted Hartley’s conflicted state of mind while he was in medical



**Hartley at 2**  
The artist sees her young son as the one bright spot in an otherwise drab tenement apartment. Perhaps he will grow up to be a famous artist or ballet dancer.

*Hartley on the Rocking Horse*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 30 x 34 in. © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. Private Collection.



**Hartley at 25**  
 Hartley has just confided to his mother that he may have to leave medical school. He cannot bear to think of the corpses in anatomy class as mere “objects” to be dissected.

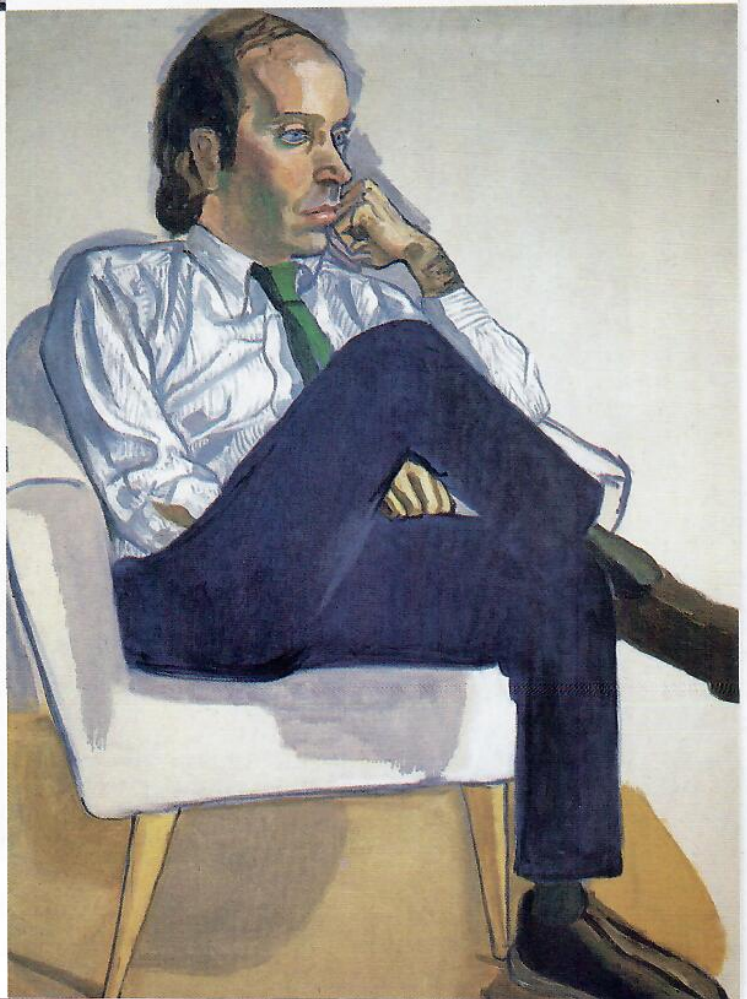
*Hartley, 1966. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36 in. © 2001 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Arthur M. Bullowa, for the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art.*

**Hartley at 37**  
 Hartley went on to become a doctor after all. Now he is approaching middle age. His gaze is distant and his pose says “leave me alone.”

*Hartley, 1978. Oil on canvas, 52 x 40 in. © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. Private Collection.*

school. The black outlines, gaunt face, deep shadows, and unfinished background heighten his sense of isolation. Hartley wears a defiant expression and a haunted look as he makes eye contact with the viewer. His pose is symmetrical yet dynamic. His cropped figure which extends beyond the canvas, and its active intersecting diagonals suggest that Hartley is still engaged in life. The artist presents him as vulnerable, flexible, and open to suggestion. This portrait also reflects the artist's opposition to the Vietnam War, in which many young men like Hartley were dying.

Despite his misgivings, Hartley stayed in medical school and went on to become a physician. *Hartley, 1978* (right), depicts Neel's son as a doctor and family man approaching middle age. The artist presents him in what she sees as the cold, white atmosphere of his profession. His face has filled out, his hairline is receding. Hartley wears a necktie, which to his mother symbolized middle-class conformity. The figure in this asymmetrical composition turns away from the viewer as he stares out of the frame into negative space. His closed, self-contained pose reflects a detached, disengaged state of mind. The man in this portrait appears preoccupied, annoyed, and alienated.



# Body Lang



In the 1960s, Neel became known for her portraits of prominent artists and art critics. In these works, the subjects' *body language* gives clues as to how they felt about themselves and others. Sculptor Duane Hanson (left) posed for Neel wearing a heavy coat that forms a protective shell. His garish clothing, high-heeled boots, long sideburns, and "helmet" hairstyle reflect the fashions of the early 1970s, when this painting was created. The portrait projects a feeling of unrest. The figure leaning back on a tiny chair forms an **unsteady diagonal**. The floor appears to be **tilted**. Hanson seems about to fall into the ominous blue-violet **cast shadow** that falls on the wall behind him. Perhaps to reflect his personality, Hanson's face has been given **two distinct sides**. The shadowed part appears smooth and youthful. But the brightly lit side of his face looks lined and careworn. The **brilliant, closely related, clashing colors** orange, magenta, and red heighten the sense of instability.

Neel did many individual portraits, but her emphasis on body language is most evident in the interactions she observed between couples and groups. Raphael and Moses Soyer were brothers who were both well-known artists. In her portrait *The Soyer Brothers* (right, below), the **small figures** of the two old men huddle together in the **center of the composition**. They

**How has Neel created a sense of urgency and instability in her portrait of sculptor Duane Hanson?**

Duane Hanson. 1972. Oil on canvas, 66 x 40 in. © Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery. Private Collection.

# uage

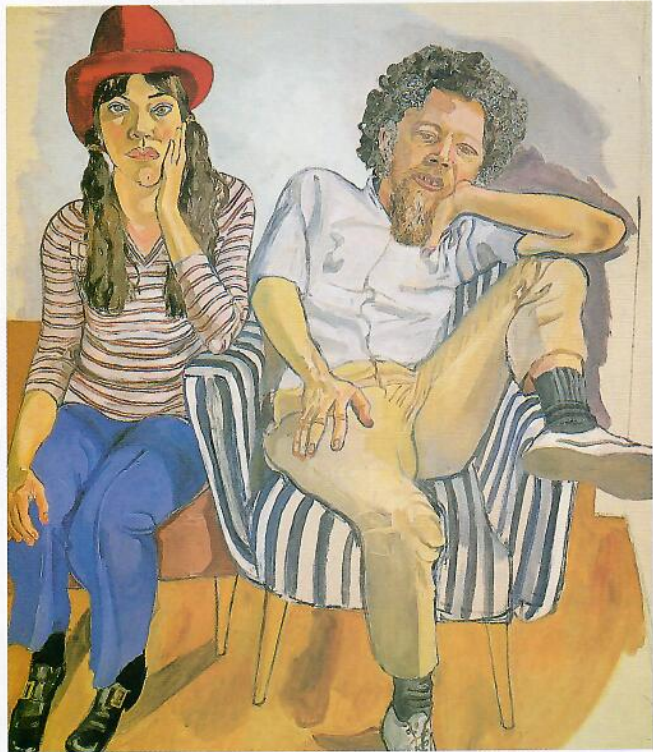
pose awkwardly on the edge of a couch that appears to **tilt forward**. The artist's **point of view**, slightly above the subjects, increases their frail appearance. The **unsteady lines** she uses to capture the men as they lean forward uncertainly express the struggle and vulnerability of old age.

In her painting of two artists who were married to each other, Neel perhaps expresses her own feelings about relationships. In *Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews* (right, above), neither subject seems comfortable. The man sprawls over a large chair, filling **most of the composition**. He looks bored and annoyed as he turns

**“A good portrait has more than accurate features. It has some other thing. If I have any talent in relation to people, it is my identification with them.” —Alice Neel**

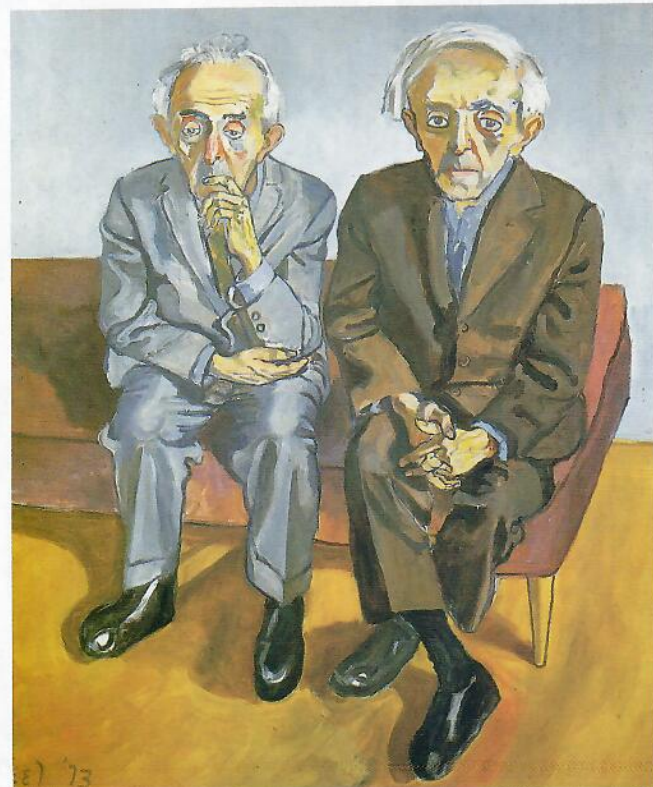
away from his companion. The woman, who sits stiffly in a **tiny space at the edge of the picture frame**, stares straight ahead. **Dark, jagged shadows, clashing patterns**, and the contrast of **color opposites** orange and blue add to the feeling of tension.

In her group portrait *The Family* (pages 8-9), Neel has painted her daughter-in-law and three of her grandchildren. The artist felt closer to her own family members, so this composition is more complex than those of her “celebrity portraits.” She sets her family in **deep space, integrates** their figures with background details, and uses **cast shadows** for emphasis. The small, thin, seated mother with averted eyes, whose feet seem to disappear into the floor, is the **focal point** of the painting. But she is surrounded, and perhaps overwhelmed, by her large, powerful daughters who stand defiantly, and stare boldly out at the viewer.



**What does the body language of this pair of artists tell you about their attitudes toward themselves and each other?**

*Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Gift of Agnes Gund; Blanchette Rockefeller Fund; Arnold A. Saltzman Fund; and Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund (by exchange).



**Artist Moses Soyer told Alice Neel: “If you intend to paint us you should, because none of us will live forever.” He died not long after this portrait was completed.**

*The Soyer Brothers*, 1973. Oil on Canvas, 60 x 46in. Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Gift of Arthur M. Bullowa, Sydney Duffy, Stewart R. Mott, Edward Rosenthal, and Purchase.



(See) '80

**ART** SCHOLASTIC  
MASTERPIECE  
OF THE MONTH #5

# The Family

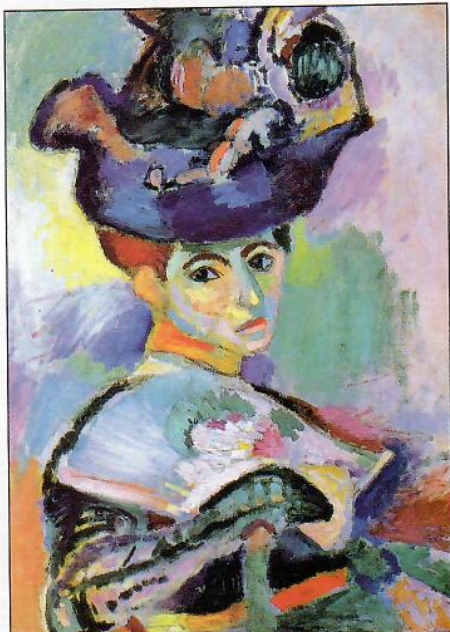
by Alice Neel

Alice Neel (1900-1984).  
The Family, 1980. Oil on canvas, 58 x 50 in.  
© Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert  
Miller Gallery. Private Collection.

"I don't know if the truth that I have told will benefit the world in any way. It is hard to go against the tide of one's time, milieu, and position. But at least I tried to reflect the 20th century and my feelings and perceptions as a woman. Not that I felt they were all that different from men's." —Alice Neel



## ART SPOTLIGHT



Henri Matisse (1869-1954). *The Woman with the Hat*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 23 1/2 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Bequest of Elise S. Haas.

### Emotional Expressions

Like Alice Neel, French artist Henri Matisse (on-REE ma-TEESE) wanted to capture “the essence” of his subject. For Matisse, the emotional essence of a painting was defined in terms of lines, shapes and colors.

In the early years of the 20th century, artists like Picasso, Van Gogh, Cezanne, (say-ZAHN), and Matisse were developing revolutionary painting styles. *The Woman with the Hat* (left), painted in 1905, can be considered one of the first modern **abstract** paintings. Although Matisse’s wife posed for this picture, the **colors** and **lines** the artist has used have

**“What interests me most is the human figure.”**

**—Henri Matisse**

become more important than his model’s features. In this work, the woman’s figure has been **simplified** and **flattened** into a pattern made up of areas of **bright unnatural color**. The patches of paint have been brushed on quickly, using loose, free, highly expressive strokes. Bits of raw, unpainted canvas show through the brushstrokes. This blending of **negative space** and **positive strokes** have integrated the figure and the background, placing them together on a **single flat picture plane**.

# Personalities in P

Like Alice Neel, these three artists have used body language to define

### Symbols of Power

Sixteenth-century German artist Hans Holbein is considered one of the greatest portraitists of all time. His highly realistic representations not only look just like their subjects, they capture the sitter’s personality and character.

What type of person do you think the subject of this painting (right) might have been? Was King Henry VIII of England shy, quiet, and retiring? The king is dressed in a robe whose **brilliant red color** dominates the picture. His immense figure nearly **fills the frame**. The **strong, confident lines** of the work and the **point of view** chosen by the artist (Henry is seen from slightly below eye level) emphasize his royal power and majesty. **Each detail** has been carefully rendered. The **triangular composition** and **flat, black background** emphasize the **focal point** of the painting, the king’s face. Best known for his aggressive leadership, enormous appetite, and his six wives (two of whom Henry had beheaded), Holbein has captured the king’s personality in this work. Henry’s small features—including tiny eyes nearly lost in the fleshy folds of his face—as well as his overbearing stance present a visual portrait of absolute power.

**“Holbein’s portrait of the King seems to live as if it moved, the head and limbs are so real.”**

**—16th-century art critic**



Horace Pippin (1888-1946). *Self-Portrait*, 1941. Oil on canvas board, 14 x 11 in. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Room of Contemporary Art Fund.



aint  
their figures.

## Powerful Portraits

Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII is so detailed and modeled that the figure appears to be set in deep space. The *Self-Portrait* (above), done by early-20th-century African-American painter Horace Pippin, is just as visually powerful, but it is **simplified, stylized, and flat**.

Pippin had no formal art training. And, if he had not been injured in 1918 at the end of World War I, he probably wouldn't have been an artist at all. For years Pippin searched for ways to express his war experiences. He learned to hold a paintbrush in his injured hand and to use his

**“The war brought out all the art in me”  
—Horace Pippin**

good hand to push the brush across the canvas. It took him three years to do his first painting, but he then went on to do hundreds more.

In this work, Pippin portrays the dignity of the artist and the struggles artists go through to express themselves. He has not limited his portrait to head and shoulders, but has included nearly his **full figure**. In his **asymmetrical composition**, the **negative blue space** in the background balances and calls attention to the **positive figure** in the lower-right corner. Pippin's rigid figure is **framed** by his chair, easel, and canvas, all **inactive horizontals and verticals**. There is one diagonal in the painting—the artist's paintbrush. This **active diagonal line**, a symbol of Pippin's creative energy, is an important **focal point** of the painting.

Hans Holbein The Younger (1498-1543). *Henry VIII*, 1542. Oil and tempera on wood, 86 1/2 x 26 x 1/4 in. George Howard Collection, Castle Howard, Yorkshire.

# Tom Liska

## Drawing People

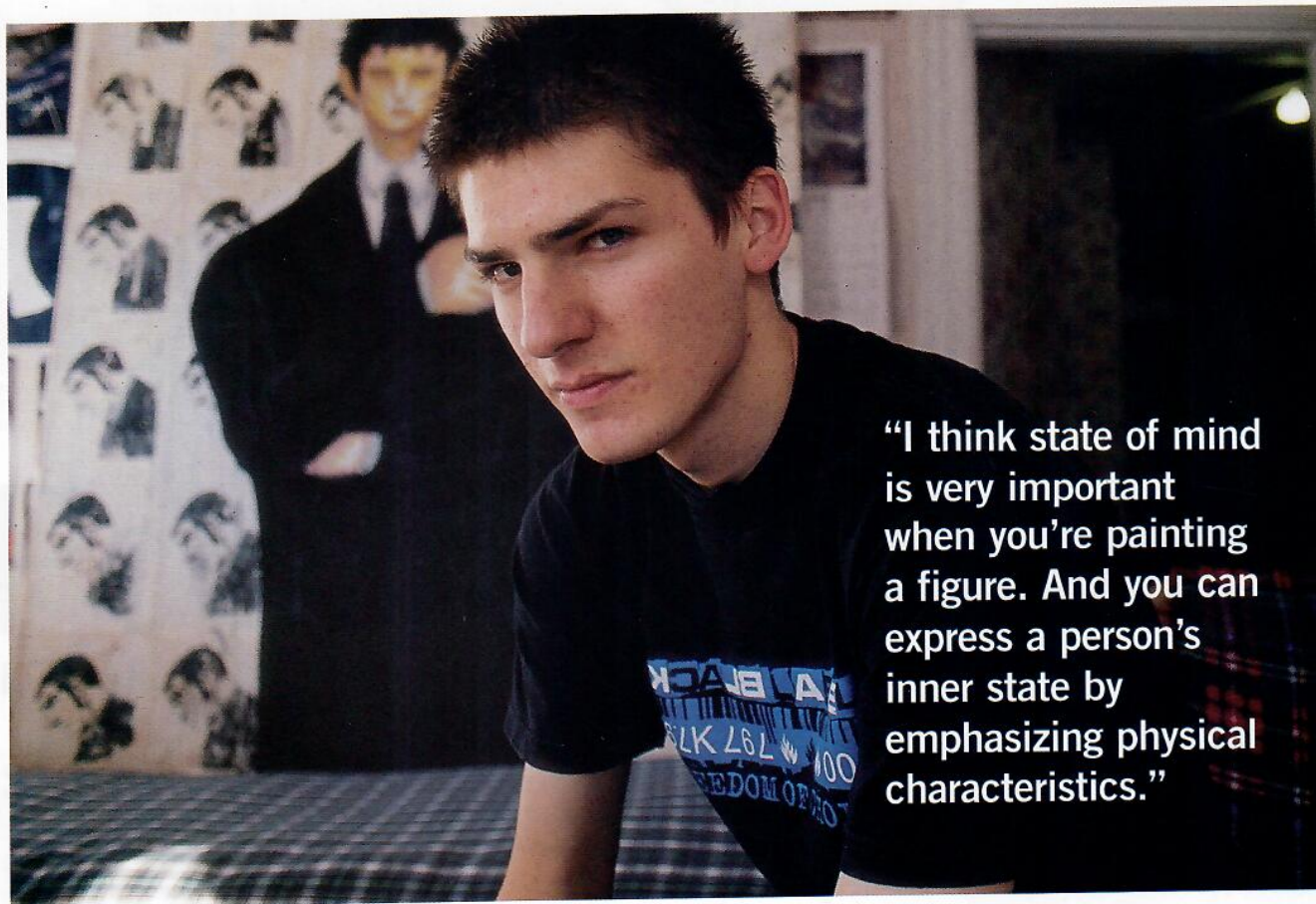


Photo : © Darren McColister/Liason Agency Network

“I think state of mind is very important when you’re painting a figure. And you can express a person’s inner state by emphasizing physical characteristics.”

Tom Liska did the award-winning and highly expressive self-portrait on the right while he was attending Brockton (Massachusetts) High School. At the same time, he was creating a series of 30 huge figurative mixed media pieces, one of which appears in the photo above.

Now a freshman at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, 19-year-old Tom hasn’t yet decided whether to major in painting or film. He says about his art, “It’s a way for me to get out my frustrations and observations on the world around me. I can take something that happened to me during the day—something as insignificant as stepping in a puddle—and work with that.”

In his spare time, Tom has been writing a movie and pursuing his favorite sport—skateboarding.

### How did you first get involved with art?

It’s something I’ve been doing for as long as I can remember. When I was 3 or 4, my family defected from Czechoslovakia. My uncle was a printmaker in Prague. My father was a film cinematographer who also did photography. Art is sort of hereditary, I guess.

### How did you come to do your award-winning portfolio of work?

One afternoon, when I was in Boston’s financial district, I saw all these corporate people with suits and briefcases. It reminded me of an ant colony. It was absurd. That experience stuck with me, and evolved into a strong statement. My sophomore year I started doing sketches of these guys in black suits. My teacher encouraged me to stick with the idea, which I did for

about three years. I introduced it on canvas, then mixed media, then tar and installation pieces. In all, I created about 30 pieces on this theme. I called the series Men in Black Suits.

### **How do people respond to your work?**

I've gotten everything from "breakthrough art" to absolute insults. My philosophy is that any viewer reaction is good—whether it's positive or negative. As long as my work provokes some sort of feeling, that's all I ask. It helps me to become a better visual artist.

### **How about the self-portrait? How did you come to do that?**

My figures are very thin, gaunt, and elongated. My teacher pointed out how similar my work was to that of an early 20th-century Austrian Expressionist artist Egon Schiele (AY-gawn SHEE-lay). Schiele was a master at conveying emotion through color and body language. Seeing his work, transformed the way I used color. To do this self-portrait, I used very little color. I wanted the look to be gritty and unfinished. The expression and gestures convey some sort of emotion; maybe a lack of remorse mixed with anxiety.

### **How would you describe your style when you paint figures?**

I like to express a certain intensity, as though the figure itself is in a kinetic state. I like to work like this because it's a way of moving away from convention. Realism can be humdrum. If your style is free, you can capture more intensity. It's not as constricting. For me that's part of the thrill, to break conventions.

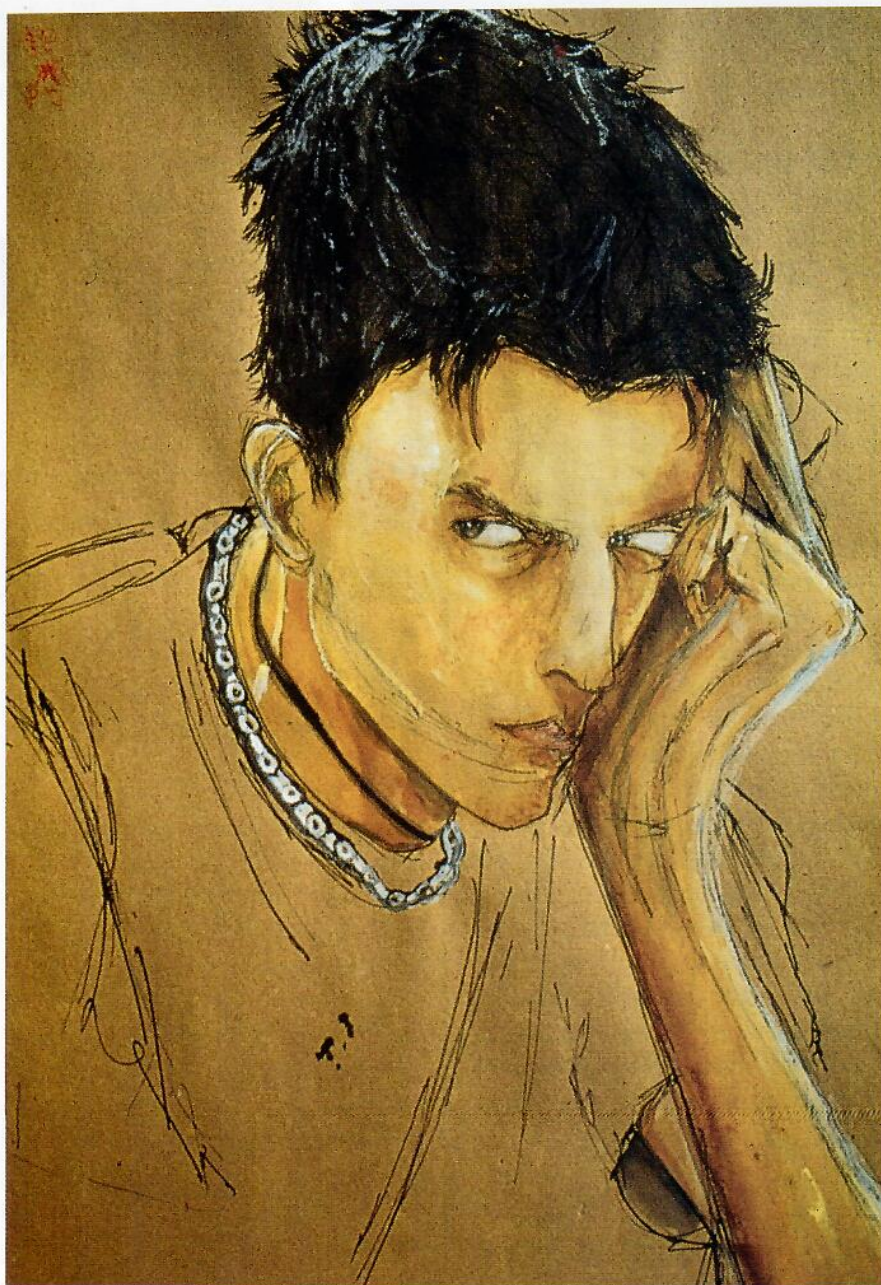
### **Is body language important in your work?**

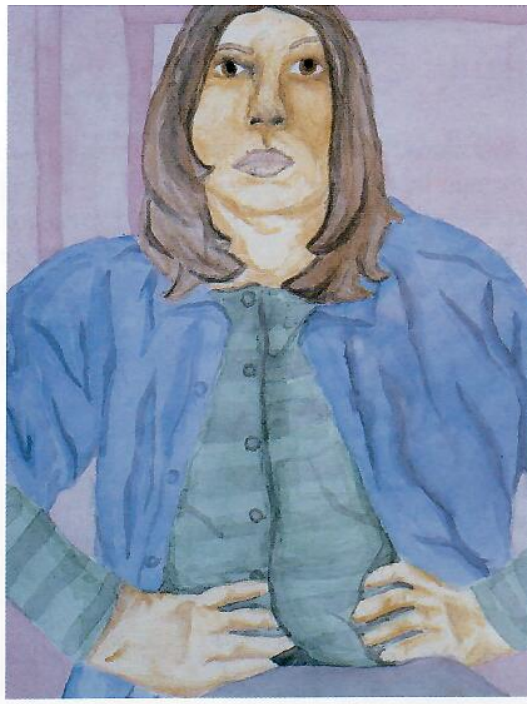
Definitely, when I'm doing figures. The self-portrait was grueling and draining because it was all about self-observation. I was frustrated, angry, and I was running out of time. But I think it worked because I was feeling fragile. I think state of mind

is very important when you're painting a figure. And you can express a person's inner state by emphasizing physical characteristics. I'm a big fan of bone structure and posture. I tend to portray my subjects as thin and gaunt to express vulnerability. In my recent work, I've been concentrating on hands and faces, emphasizing indentations on the cheekbones.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring artists like yourself?**

Don't listen to me (he laughs). I guess the best advice I could give is to follow your instincts. If it seems right to you and you feel passionate about what you're working on, you never know where it will take you.





Paintings by (left to right): Shanna L. Diephuis; Kimberly A. Deets; Justin D. Boyles; LeAnn M. Stuart; Joshua J. Sanchez

## SCHOLASTIC ART WORKSHOP

# Painting a Watercolor Portrait

Create a portrait that expresses the personality of both the model and the artist.

Alice Neel's paintings are so affecting and revealing because she was completely in tune with her subjects. As the artist put it, "When I paint a portrait, I sometimes feel that I have no self. I feel I've gone into that other person." Neel's ability to see and express the personalities of her subjects has made her one of the most important portraitists of the last century.

In this workshop, you'll be working from a model. You'll then translate what you see into an expressive watercolor portrait.

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr., art instructor, Morrison (IL) Junior High School. Assisted by Nicholas R. Bonneur, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL. Photos by Larry Gregory

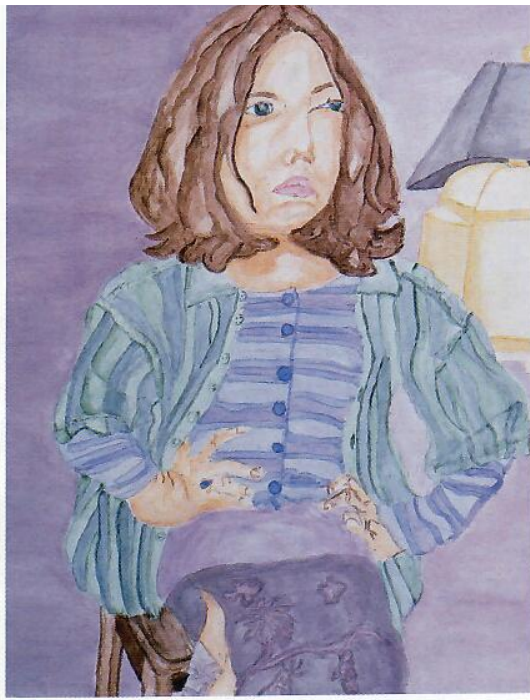
### MATERIALS

- No. 2 school pencils
- 18 x 24 in. 80lb white sulfite drawing paper
- 8 or 12 watercolors
- Masonite board
- Masking tape
- #7 and #10 soft hair watercolor brushes (such as *Dick Blick Masterstroke*)
- Palettes (or old dinner plates)
- Containers for water
- Paper towels
- Small pieces white sulfite drawing-paper scraps

### STEP 1

Arrange a model in a straight chair against a plain background. Model should wear clothing with a distinctive pattern. (Model should break every 15 minutes; when posing, there should be no interaction with class.) As many students as possible should sit directly in front of model. Do one 15-minute blind

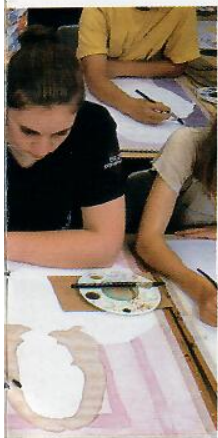




contour practice drawing, then two 35-minute contour drawings. Drawing will serve as a guide for painting, so lines should be very light. Using edges of objects behind model, divide background into two or three simple areas with no detail.

## STEP 2

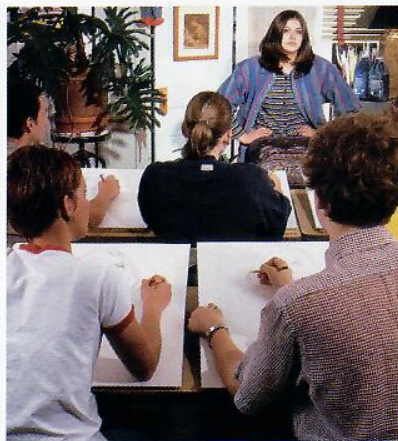
On scraps of drawing paper, practice basic watercolor techniques. Watercolor dries immediately, so you must work quickly. Watercolor is not like tempera or acrylic; it is meant to be *transparent* and should not be reworked. First, select right size brush for the area to be covered. Then mix a small amount of paint with a large amount of water. Apply a uniform, background wash with a *loaded* (water-filled) brush. Add water to make color lighter. Practice making areas of flat and graduated color. Mixing color washes “wet on wet” produces blurred, bleeding areas of mixed color. Wet paint on dry paper produces sharp, clean edges;



wet paint on damp paper produces soft edges. The tip of the brush makes a thin line; pressing down on the brush creates a thick line. Rinse brush thoroughly between colors; change water frequently.

## STEP 3

Select the most visually interesting and strongest contour drawing and use it as the basis of your painting. Tape all four sides of your drawing to a board. You should work in stages, from *light to dark*. For white, let the paper show through. Since watercolor is transparent, when one color is brushed over another, both colors are visible. You can begin by washing out the background area of the composition. Let dry, then brush in lighter washes on the figure. After all washes dry, try overlapping light washes of a related color. Finally, brush in darker washes, darker colors, and any darker details you want to emphasize. Refer to the model frequently; stand back from your work to evaluate it.



## SOME SOLUTIONS

Will the format of your portrait be **vertical**, **square**, or **horizontal**? Will you look at the model from **eye level**, from slightly **below**, or a little **above**? Whether the model's pose is **open** or **closed** will affect the way your

painting looks. Your composition can be **symmetrical** (same on both sides) or **asymmetrical** (both sides are different). The figure can **fill the frame** and be **cropped** at the edges. Or it can be **small** in size, placed in a **corner**, and balanced by **negative background space**. Will the **focal point** of your painting be the figure's face, or another part of the composition? How will you call attention to this focal point? Will it be **darker**, **larger**, **unfinished**, **framed** by background objects, surrounded by **shadows**? Will you emphasize **outlines**, or **shapes**? Will the colors you use be harmonious and **related** (blue, green, purple) or **clashing color opposites** (blue and orange, red and green, purple and yellow)?

# Fragmented Figures

Do any of these images look familiar?

Alice Neel and other portrait painters use many different techniques to capture their subjects. Each of the details shown on the right is from a work featured in this issue. Next to each phrase below, write the letter of the visual that best applies (some phrases may fit more than one detail).

- \_\_\_ 1. Cast shadows
- \_\_\_ 2. Symmetrical composition
- \_\_\_ 3. Negative space
- \_\_\_ 4. Color opposites
- \_\_\_ 5. Unsteady lines
- \_\_\_ 6. Active diagonal
- \_\_\_ 7. Disappearing feet
- \_\_\_ 8. Eye contact
- \_\_\_ 9. Highly detailed
- \_\_\_ 10. Helmet hair
- \_\_\_ 11. Dominating color
- \_\_\_ 12. Deep space
- \_\_\_ 13. Focal point
- \_\_\_ 14. Fear of medical school
- \_\_\_ 15. Portrait of absolute power
- \_\_\_ 16. Black outlines
- \_\_\_ 17. Flat, simplified shapes
- \_\_\_ 18. Realistically modeled
- \_\_\_ 19. Middle class conformity
- \_\_\_ 20. Strong, confident lines
- \_\_\_ 21. Unfinished background

