

“Through the Eyes of an Artist”

Lipscomb University Magazine Fall 2007

Reference <http://michaelshaneneal.com/publications/through-the-eyes-of-an-artist/>

“I do not judge, I only chronicle,” stated John Singer Sargent, an American painter who became the most celebrated portraitist of his time. Artists do capture and chronicle their world in ways that very few people are able to do. They leave behind not only their art for generations to enjoy, but also their knowledge of their profession. The artistic wisdom developed through a lifetime of perfecting their talents lives on through the protégées of the artist.

Michael Shane Neal ('91), knows the value of the relationship between the artists and mentor in the art world. Neal, now among the most sought-after portrait artists in America, values the teachings that were passed along to him from a line of painters going back to Sargent. Almost fifteen years ago, Neal was introduced to Everett Raymond Kinstler, a native New Yorker who has painted more portraits of cabinet officers than any artist in the country's history. Kinstler has painted five presidents (Nixon, Ford, Reagan, H.W. Bush, and Clinton) and hundreds of portraits for well-known personalities such as Tony Bennett, Carol Burnett, Katharine Hepburn, John Wayne, and Lady Bird Johnson. He is currently painting the official mayoral portrait for former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Kinstler and Neal developed a close friendship and a strong bond as mentor and protégée. “When we met,” Neal states, “I was passionate about wanting to mold my talent into shape. Kinstler critiques my work and offers invaluable insight and advice on everything from painting to the business of being an artist.”

Kinstler also knows the value of the time-honored tradition of handing down knowledge to protégées. Kinstler studied under Frank Vincent DuMond, and American impressionist painter whose other students included Norman Rockwell and Georgia O'Keefe. Kinstler was also a lifelong friend of James Montgomery Flagg, a child prodigy and master of pen and ink. Flagg knew Sargent well and visited his studio in London to see the master at work. Flagg and DuMond passed along to Kinstler their priceless insights. Kinstler values the inspiration passed along from his mentors and colleagues. Keepsakes remind him of their influence. He states, “My studio is the one DuMond worked in, my easel was Flagg's, and I have John Singer Sargent's palette.”

Kinstler also has words of wisdom he shares with Neal, who considers this advice pivotal in his development as an artist. “Kinstler taught me about value, how to understand form, structure and edges, to discern the effect of what you see and get the simplest statement possible,” Neal comments. “Early on, I was just painting what was in front of me. He taught me to concentrate on the things that add to what I'm trying to say.”

Neal now steps into the line of artists sharing his inspiration with students hoping to continue in

the tradition. “I make teaching fit into my schedule. I started teaching weekly classes at Cheekwood Museum of Art. Then we moved the classes to the fellowship hall of Crieve Hall Church of Christ. I did that for five years. Now I teach workshops and give lectures for schools, art organizations, and civic clubs from time to time.

“I am a stronger painter for teaching. You are inspired when you guide someone else through the process. Teaching is the least I can do to give back in appreciation for all that I have been given,” said Neal.

Neal’s students know his impressive list of accomplishments. In 2001, Neal won the Portrait Society of America’s International Portrait Competition. The media attention that came with that win boosted his career quickly. The art curator for the United States Senate was among those who took note of his win. After being asked to submit a portfolio to the curator, Neal received work that he would be commissioned to paint Senator Arthur Vandenberg for the United States Capitol. This commission placed Neal among the youngest artists ever commissioned by the United States Senate. The Vandenberg portrait hangs in the Senate Reception Room with only 6 other portraits. “It’s an honor to think of my work as being permanently installed in a place with such a rich history,” reflects Neal.

Neal has since completed numerous still life paintings and over 400 portraits including U.S. Senators, corporate and civic leaders, college presidents and family portraits commissioned by people across the nation. He recently began painting former Lipscomb President Steve Flatt, U.S. Senator Robert C. Byrd, Senator Arlen Specter, members of Senator Bill Frist’s family and a portrait of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor to hang in Arizona State University’s Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law.

Neal is a people person who enjoys using his talents to capture his subjects on canvas. “Being able to do what I love to do is an incredible blessing,” he states. “As an artist I get to know the people I am painting. I enjoy capturing their personalities in the portrait.”

Neal, who received a John and Mary Nelle Hutcheson Scholarship while studying art at Lipscomb, remembers his early days as a “starving artist” knocking on doors at galleries to gain recognition. “I got a couple of commissions before I graduated,” he comments. “Drs. Jill and John Parker of Lipscomb commissioned me to do some work and then other Lipscomb faculty members did the same. The Lipscomb faculty really supports their students. Their support has been important from the very start of my career. When I first started trying to make a living as an artist, I would buy fruit to paint and then eat the fruit for a meal. I remember the inspiration from Dawn Whitelaw (’67), my first painting instructor at Lipscomb. I now tell other young artists to hang on to their dream. I found courage and encouragement along the way. Now I get to work in my new studio near my wife Melanie and two daughters doing what I love every day.”