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Eye of the Perfectionist

* With his obsession for detail and control of his subjects, photographer Phillip Stewart Charis emulates the style of Gainsborough in his portraits.
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In the San Juan Capistrano studio, the assistant is readying the set. A large canvas, painted to look like a French landscape tapestry, hangs as backdrop. Before it, several chairs have come and gone until Phillip Stewart Charis gives his nod to the antique bergere with the exact taupe tone and distressed texture he's after. The assistant, Ricardo Belcher, selects a silk floral arrangement and sets it behind the chair to one side. Charis eyes the composition, then asks Belcher to lay the flowers on their side.

Outside the nearby dressing room, Maryanne Charis, the portrait photographer's wife, confers with subjects Patty Wellman of Mission Viejo and her 4-year-old daughter, Destiny. Maryanne, a fashion stylist before becoming Mrs. Phillip Charis 25 years ago, tucks the ruffles of Destiny's socks under so they don't show, asks the child to remove her gum and says no to the question of lipstick. "Mr. Charis wouldn't like that."

"Frighteningly obsessive," is how Robert Sobieszek, photography curator for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, describes Charis. But for the photographer, artist and businessman, his maniacal way of controlling details combined with his Gainsborough-esque style are what, he and others believe, distinguish his work. It also allows him to command thousands of dollars for his portraits.

"Everything is controlled," says Charis, who at 73 is a dead ringer for talk show host Larry King. "Then all that's left is the expression that I think is most exciting. People can look good, bad or indifferent. I want none of that. I want exceptional, terrific, the essence of that person."

And, in return, he almost demands that his work be taken seriously. He bristles when he hears that clients intend to hang their portrait

anywhere but in the living room. He politely chastises clients who don't properly light their portraits and agonizes over those who order their portraits too small.

A hundred or more years ago, people of nobility and the landed gentry often commissioned portrait artists to paint their likenesses. Today, the wealthy are just as apt to hire Charis to do the same with film instead of paint.

Though Charis has been creating photographic portraits for the Southland's gentry for 50 years, he didn't start doing the work he's known for--the near-life-size color photographic portraits, which look painted--until the mid-1960s. That's when Eastman Kodak came out with technology that allowed for the making of giant color prints, which could be mounted onto canvas and stretcher bars to look like paintings.

That's when Charis broke new ground, said Sobieszek, who wrote the text and edited the photography for a large-format book on Charis' work, "A Lasting Tradition," which Charis self-published in 1995. "He was one of the first to make giant color pictures in portraiture, and he went on to establish a style that's reminiscent of the grand masters, but that is uniquely his."

Since then, Charis estimates he's created more than 10,000 portraits for the well-known, including Nancy Reagan, Joan Collins, Henry Mancini, former Mayor Tom Bradley and Michael Landon, as well as for the merely well-to-do. Many Californians will remember his work from his displays at the entrances of the old Bullock's and Macy's stores, where many admired his work but few could afford it.

A Charis portrait costs from \$1,000 to \$7,000, depending on the size (the average is 30 inches by 40 inches), finish and frame. Most people spend between \$3,000 and \$4,000, said Maryanne Charis.

Just as the price isn't for everyone, neither is the look. Definitely not avant-garde, these portraits are not at home in rustic or contemporary settings. They are Old World and traditional, like their creator, who never seems to tire of the process or the product. "I love doing it and seeing it, presenting it to the client and seeing the client love it and pay for it," he says. "What a marvelous circle!"

Love of Photography Started in Childhood

Charis, born in Detroit to Greek immigrants, was an only child. His father was in the restaurant business and his mother stayed home. His love of photography started when he was 14 and received a gift of a photo

set with a Brownie Box camera. He turned one bathroom in the house into a darkroom, developing prints in the bathtub. He later studied photography at the Ray/Vogue School of photography in Chicago and in 1949 left Chicago to continue his studies at the Art Center, then in Los Angeles. In 1951, he opened his first studio in Pasadena, on South Euclid Avenue.

He studied the great portrait painters, Gainsborough, Van Dyck, Sargent and Reynolds, and borrowed their techniques to create a formula that would be his ticket to satisfied patrons and commercial success. He noted, for example, that the masters consistently represented their subjects at 70% to 80% of life size, because that proportion conveyed the greatest realism. He re-created their chiaroscuro lighting and backgrounds of landscapes or clouds. He imitated their vignetting technique of darkening the portrait's edges to focus attention on the face. He replicated their usually triangular compositions, filling in dead space with tasteful props, usually furniture or flowers. And he had his subjects dress formally and pose seriously.

That means no smiles. "They're not my style," says Charis, who wants faces to look tranquil. Instead, he wants a smile in the eyes. He's looking for dignity, decorum and elegance. "Things that are sorely lacking in our society today," says Sobieszek.

Wellmans Keep Coming Back for More

In the studio, Patty Wellman, looking regal in black satin and white chiffon, sits erect on the chair. Destiny stands beside her wearing a tea-length white chiffon dress and black velvet Mary Janes. Charis wheels around the umbrella lighting to cast the shadows just so on their faces.

"Cross your ankles. Chin up. Close your lips." He squeaks an ancient toy rubber duck to animate Destiny, then: flash. One of the 10 shots he'll take this session, which lasts less than an hour, will become the fifth portrait the Wellman family has commissioned from Charis during the last 10 years.

"He's truly a master," said Scott Wellman, an attorney and the husband and father of the subjects. "I've had portraits done by others, but his are in a league of their own. They're timeless."

But still, some say, it's a photograph, and old-fashioned at that.

"One of the great challenges in art is to get across why works of certain photographers are as important as equally skilled painters'," says Sobieszek, noting that in the mid-1960s only two museums in the country had photographic exhibits, the Museum of Modern Art, New York,

and the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y. Now every major museum does, including LACMA, which houses one of Charis' later works, one of the first abstract portraits he has begun experimenting with, called "Golden Girl."

Sobieszek believes Charis' work will stand the test of time. "Historians of the future will look back on the tradition of the grand manner of portraiture that started in the mid-18th century with Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds, and continued through Sargent and Charis," he says. And while he doesn't see portrait photography replacing portrait painting, he does see the two mediums coexisting on a par. "When you see a Charis portrait, it gains an aura that a painted portrait does not have, and that's the realism--but softened."

And the formula for that style is not something he jealously guards. Rather, he's written about it in photography magazines, gives lectures and is currently training two proteges in his traditional methods.

His traditionalism, however, extends beyond his portraits. During preview sessions, when orders are placed, Charis requires the man of the house to be present, which annoys many of his more emancipated female clients. But they put up with his chauvinism, because, as one client put it, "he makes everyone look so good."

His wife also has had to defer to his traditional ways by giving up a thriving career to marry him. "I wanted her to," he says without apology. "Those were my values."

"But I'm very traditional too," Maryanne hastily adds. A second marriage for both, the couple has four children between them from prior marriages and eight grandchildren.

His Wife Helps Him Run the Studio

Despite their decision for her to quit work, Maryanne became instrumental in the running of his studio. When they married in 1976, she helped him relocate his Pasadena studio to South Lake Avenue, where his portrait work flourished. They sold that studio 11 years ago to Benoit Malphettes, a former fashion photographer who studied with Charis for four months and continues to run the studio under the Charis name using Charis' techniques.

That year they moved to San Juan Capistrano, ostensibly to retire, and bought the famous Forster Mansion, a 6,000-square-foot home built in 1910. Soon after, they opened a second studio and gallery next door.

Eight years later, they moved again to Dana Point and transformed the mansion into a photography museum. The House of Photographic Art houses the works of many notable photographers, including Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Paul Outerbridge and, of course, Charis.

With the exception of one traditional portrait of his wife, the rest of Charis' museum collection looks nothing like the work he's most known for. Instead, it features his most recent photographic venture: posterized abstractions. Using a computer, he digitally revisits some of his older works, sometimes using only pieces of a portrait, and re-creates new, highly modern images.

"This digital technology is every bit as exciting, maybe more, as the breakthrough of color 40 years ago," he says with the kind of light in his eye he so likes to capture. "With digital technology you don't have to depend on anything, not the camera, not the film, not the light, not the lab. You have total control."

PHOTO: Charis has photographed many celebrities, including Engelbert Humperdinck in 1994.

ID NUMBER: 20010326gaocqske

PHOTOGRAPHER: PHILLIP STEWART CHARIS

PHOTO: "Cross your ankles. Chin up. Close your lips," Phillip Stewart Charis tells Patty Wellman and her daughter, Destiny.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: DON TORMEY / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: PHILLIP STEWART CHARIS

ID NUMBER: 20010326g9yor7ke

PHOTOGRAPHER: DON TORMEY / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: One of photographer Phillip Stewart Charis' first abstract portraits, entitled "Golden Girl," hangs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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