

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEARTLAND

Painter captures family, furry friends sitting pretty

By Mary Daniels

Tribune staff reporter

For Elizabeth Cameron, a family portrait including it's beloved four-legged members, is capturing "a moment in time." A precious moment that is ephemeral.

What is special about Cameron's work is that hers is "really very personal," she says. She strives for "more of a natural expression and getting an unguarded moment."

The artist works out of a studio overlooking farm fields on the second floor of her horse farm in Racine, Wis. This is where she practices what she calls her "life's delight, creating commissioned portrait paintings" of people and the companion animals they love.

Her clients have ranged from librarians to heiresses, and subjects from guinea pigs to a senator, she says. Whomever it may be, they experience a process as much spiritual as physical.

Solo is better: "I usually recommend painting individual children, often with a childhood pet, since it becomes something they can have when they grow up, avoiding future ownership dilemmas when there are two or three children in a portrait. And you can really bring out the unique personality and style of each child that way.

"The children are so beautiful, but they change so fast. I'm always impressed by the parents who have the foresight to do this," she says. Her favorite client is the one "who gets it that a portrait gives lifelong enjoyment."

Parents be gone:

Cameron's portraits start with photographs that she takes herself, an important step. She shoots several rolls of film and picks the best. When photographing animals, Cameron has learned to ask the owner to leave. Then, she says, the horse or dog thinks, "There goes 'mother' or 'father'. Where are they going?" Meanwhile, someone else holds the animal and the 'parent' becomes the off-camera "ear-getter," positioning the head, and getting the ears forward and up. Often the same works with children.

Mileage on brushes:

Cameron's strongest influences are "the natural world, the total love of animals." But she continues to polish her skills and for the last three years has been studying classical methods with Helena Ehlke, who teaches out of the Milwaukee Art Museum. "She speaks the language of oils and Old Master techniques," says Cameron. Working with her "bumped my oil work up a notch, because I try so hard to create atmosphere, building layers and transparencies. It



This portrait by Libby Cameron is of her niece Marissa Cameron, at the age of 10. The challenge for the artist was capturing the beautiful pale skin tone of the subject, she says.



Libby Cameron poses atop her mare, Royel's Faerietale. "She'll do anything for sugar. So it's really quite safe," Cameron says.

is like painting with layers of cellophane. This (technique) is different than the more direct painting of today."

Singing her own song: One of her six siblings, Julia Cameron, is author of "The Artist's Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity" (Jeremy { . Tarcher/Penguin, 222 pages, \$15.95). Elizabeth, known as Libby to family and friends, has illustrated five of Julia Cameron's other creativity books.

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Among them, her favorite is “How To Avoid Making Art (or anything else you enjoy)” (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 140 pages. \$13.95). “It is like having Pegasus for a sister,” Elizabeth says of Julia. I wouldn’t be the artist I am today if it weren’t for her encouragement. One of the main things her sister did was convince her to be content in going her own way. “A bluebird doesn’t criticize it’s own song. A cardinal doesn’t criticize its song. Natural portraits may not have always been in vogue, but it is *my* song,” says Cameron.

A fabulous year: Based on her drawings, Cameron won a scholarship to the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee (later named the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design). She graduated in 1974 with a bachelor’s degree with a painting major. For nine years, she worked as an editor/artist of activity books at what was then a prominent children’s book publisher, Western Publishing in Racine, Wis., the publisher of the Little Golden Books for children. (The firm was bought by Mattel, Inc. and ownership has changed several times subsequently.) When Western was sold, Cameron went on a year’s hiatus in Europe. She supported herself painting portraits of friends, their families and their pets in Marbella, Spain. “I soon figured out that the surrealism I pursued in art school pales in comparison to my love of the natural and the real world,” she says. Portrait painting was becoming her focus. “I stayed in Spain for a fabulous year, but I missed my family. I began life again in the States in 1987, this time as a full-time portrait painter.

Walking the fine line: Any favorite subjects? “It would be hard to pick one. I love it all,” she says. Portrait painting “is a very scary thing to do. It can be a

stretch because you don’t know what people are going to ask of you. I definitely want their input, as what I see as beautiful they might not want. It can be a fine line.”

Guinea pigs and a senator:

And what about those guinea pigs? “There were four of them,” she says. “I found out they didn’t get along, so I posed them each individually and painted them as if they were together.” Earlier in her career, she wanted to practice on somebody intimidating and chose former Tennessee Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr., a friend of the family. She painted the senator with his St. Bernard dog, and his first wife, the later Joy Dirksen Baker, with her basset hound. The Bakers bought the portraits when they were finished.

Cost: “A client gets an individual quote when we know size, acrylic, watercolor or oil; how complex; with how many subjects; and if I do the reference photography, etc.,” she says. “With one subject, a simple background, the small watercolor head studies start at \$700; acrylics, 12 by 16 inches in size, start at \$2,500.; oils start at \$2,800.” Her most elaborate portrait has been a family for \$15,000 and a large oil of a dozen pets was more than \$10,000. “I have many clients who spend in the lower range, and then they often get several people or furry family members done in a series over time. I really do become the family painter.” Cameron makes payment arrangements.

Worth the wait: A portrait takes about 40 hours of painting- or about three months to complete- since the different layers of paint have to dry, says Cameron. She can frame the portrait for customers, usually at cost.

Contact: 262-681-3203 or visit www.elizabethcameron.com.



Wendy McCalvy is shown riding her foxhunter Winston. McCalvy has been a repeat customer of Cameron’s, commissioning six or seven other portraits.