

The Portrait (Done by Phyllis Feldinger)

I've just received a gift -- a portrait painted four years ago when I posed for 12 artists who needed a live model. I was reluctant to have my imperfections recorded on canvas but the deal was clinched when one of the artists said, "You'd be a perfect model, and we'd get to talk to you about your writing and the work you do." What I never thought about was how it would feel to see a dozen interpretations of my face and body.

The artists all proved to be thoughtful, interesting women. But what I really loved about those sessions was that those women gave me their undivided attention. Their eager attentiveness lulled me into an ongoing, self-revealing conversation that was both soothing and addictive. With my body settled in a comfortable pose, my mind wandered free, exploring its own depths in a way that mimicked psychotherapy. For four weeks, I relished those weekly two-hour sessions so much that I felt guilty taking the "model fee" that the artists placed during each session in an envelope on the table beside me.

I was too shy to wander around during breaks when I was allowed to stretch. Though I was fully clothed, it was as if I feared seeing myself naked. I also was afraid that I would not like what the artists had painted. Or that perhaps I would like it too much, and that would be immodest. So, I simply talked and talked, to my heart's content, not knowing that my talking exposed my inner self to those insightful artists.

When the four-week series ended, my southern upbringing forced me to glance at the dozen canvases and make approving noises. I commented on how each artist had painted a different version of me, capturing some specific aspect: one caught my eyes, another my skin color, another my hair, another my mouth, another my hands. . . It was almost like peeping through a window into my own soul. I hurried away from the paintings.

"Oh, no," I said to the group when someone suggested that my husband might want to buy one of the paintings. "I could never live with a portrait of myself. Portraits are for people with big egos." And now, suddenly, I am the owner of one of those portraits. One so full of life it is as if a better version of me has come to live in my house.

When I first began to write, I told my favorite aunt that I could never be famous. Why? Because as the fourth child in my family, I had no childhood pictures to show reporters who'd want to document my life. The next time I saw my aunt, she gave me a small box. It contained photos of me, taken by parents of

neighborhood children with whom I had played while I lived with her. As I browsed through the box, I was intrigued by the nappy-headed, ragged little girl I saw. I also marveled at the confidence and enthusiasm she exuded. I liked her and was glad she was me.

As I unwrapped my portrait, I was awash in embarrassment. It was beautiful, but it felt like I was looking at my naked ego. Here I was, captured in full color, as exposed as that little street urchin. But now, I see a full-grown woman, radiant in all her knowing glory. What would my mother say? Modesty is a trait she pounded into me, and the idea of my own portrait seemed scandalous. Is this how people see me every day? I tried to dissect the parts of the portrait and disavow its replication of my parts. But I cannot, for its sum was truly greater than its parts. The longer I examine it, the more I realize that she captured my spirit with her paints in a way that photographs have never done. I feel as if the portrait is a living, breathing person, and frequently wander into my living room to examine it, and check whether it is as I remembered it. It is as if a better version of my self has come to live in my house. My good-looking sister.

Our sense of self is formed when we are young and I grew up in a house with no mirrors. Of late, I have come to realize that my mother withheld her mirror in an effort to keep me chaste and pure (I was her last opportunity to produce a southern belle). Because she died when I was so young, I never got the opportunity to rebel against her teachings. Thus, I have always cultivated my interior in an effort to beautify my exterior. While it has not harmed me, it has left me unsure of my exterior and always surprised when someone admires my appearance. The painting is how I would wish to look. How my other self - the one who is secure in her knowledge of self - would look. The artist looked into the mirror of my soul, and painted me beautifully.

July 5, 2004

My Dear Phyllis,

Where shall I begin? First, I must say "thank you," as my mother taught me to do upon receiving a gift -- and a what a wonderful gift your portrait is! Then, the writer in me wants to tell you that it is a portrait fit for a celebrity! I will always cherish it. By the way, my husband loves it, too!

With great appreciation, Sarah