



OLGA SWEET



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREA CERASO

PRESTIGIOUS PORTRAITIST

Olga is an extraordinary portraitist! Her style says 'Official Presidential Portrait', and maybe that's because her mentor, Ronald Sherr, did the Official Presidential Portrait of George H.W. Bush that's hanging in the National Portrait Gallery. Yet Olga's work is even more incredibly efficient. Capturing everything about the subject in what seems like just a few brush strokes. No need for the kind of 'make-up' of flesh-tone paint even some of the greatest portraitists require to give the feeling of body and life.

If from moment to moment it seems like she's a bit distracted...make no mistake, the reason is, there's a lot going on up there! She's attractive and intriguing. And if her still detectable Russian accent, and somewhat Euro-politan demeanor make her seem a little different - like Sting's Englishman in New York...well, Olga is also every bit an American citizen...and a local mom!

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Olga was born and raised near Moscow. She has a Bachelors and a Masters in Art and Philosophy from Moscow Imperial University. As a part of her PhD program, Olga came to study at The Carter Center in Atlanta, where she met her husband, Robert, who was an Emory grad who had returned to Atlanta to be a Researcher at the Center. "We were married on Cumberland Island. Robert has an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin and studied literature and history at Oxford University, and he became a Visiting Professor at a liberal arts college in Atlanta, so we stayed there for eight years. But then he switched to University Development and took a job at Vassar. We moved to Millbrook, New York, where our older son, James, a gifted photographer who just graduated from UConn, was born," Olga recounts. "Then Robert moved jobs to Princeton, which is when our younger son, William, was born. In 2010, as Robert's work had become more and more consultancy and remote, we decided to move to New Canaan. William is now a Senior at New Canaan High School, plays on the Varsity Tennis Team, and is already quite focused on the environment... He's devoted thousands of hours to eradicating invasive species and deterring their negative impact. We live close to town, with two Parakeets, Dom and Perignon, and a Sparrow, Amelius, whom we allow to fly freely around the house. We had a wonderful cat, Octavia, and a beautiful white rabbit, Lord Chuffnel - named from the P.G. Wodehouse novels on Jeeves and Wooster - who helped raise our boys."



"I was an only child, and my mother made sure I was introduced to art and music at a young age, and that art and music school was a critical part of my education. I painted all the time as a kid! I also wrote and published poetry, and my way of being concise in my poetry carried over to my painting. And I play the piano, but very little now," Olga says with a smile.

I'd taken some drawing and painting classes at Yale in the 90s, but I didn't start painting seriously until I had the opportunity, starting in 2001, to do a four-year apprenticeship in New York with Ronald Sherr.

He was an amazing man and taught me so much. I admired how his work was always very proper, but never seemed stiff or artificial, and how I felt like I got to know each person he painted. ...He liked some drawings I'd done of Ingres masterpieces, and he encouraged me and my style. He gave me a better understanding of simplicity...and beauty."



OLGA

DELVES INTO HER TECHNIQUE, saying "I work for three or four hours a day on several paintings I may be doing at any one time, and each painting might take three to six months to produce. I often start with lights, then add mid tones, then add the darks, which is the opposite of the traditional way of painting. Nearly every brushstroke is permanent, and some of the 'mistakes' turn out to be some of my better brushstrokes. I often leave the preparatory lines as well, as I think they make the painting less formal. I look at how the painting looks in the bright light and in the near dark. For me, the eyes always stand out. It's sometimes a struggle and sometimes a joy, but I'm always working to bring out the quintessential character of my subject. I love people, and I want that to come through in my art. My portrait of Karl von der Heyden is one of my favorites. There's not much detail, but I think you meet the man - whom I've always admired."



"My first client was Lady Mary Baggster-Collins, whom I met in Millbrook and who liked a painting I'd done. I did her graphite portrait from life, no photographs, for \$200. Her cousin, the Countess Lucy von Stirum, commissioned me to paint her two grandchildren. ...Now I get six-figure portraits commissioned! ...But regardless of the price, and surely when it's for free, I still paint 'for pleasure' - mine and the recipient's," Olga declares. "I love seeing how happy people are with their portraits! I did portraits of the two children of the Director of Japanese Art at Princeton, and he and his wife say it's one of the most important things in their lives. My art takes me to interesting places and to meet the most interesting people. I did a portrait of the Duke of Argyll and visited His Grace at his ancestral home, Inveraray Castle, in Scotland, and also got to meet the Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Christopher Baker, and the Curator of Portraiture, Imogen Gibbon. I love polo, and have painted Nacho Figueras and Prince Harry from that world. I did a portrait of the Archduke Dr. Geza von Habsburg-Lothringen, the former Chair of Christie's Europe and the world's leading authority on



the Russian court jeweler Carl Faberge, and got to go with the Archduke to the Opening and Private Viewing of the Faberge Exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. One of my clients is the iconic Stuart Weitzman: Stuart has so influenced my style and aesthetic sensibility. And one of my favorite memories is of presenting

PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER



with my two portraits of him, one graphite, the other oil. President Carter met with my family and me for almost an hour. At one point, William, then seven, shared with President Carter something he had heard on PBS: 'Do you know how you can tell if someone is lying to you? He does not look you in the eye!'. President Carter was very, very serious and at the end of the meeting he turned to William, and said, "I've learned so much from you," and presented him with a desk set that had been on the HMS Resolute Desk in the Oval Office." Notably, Ben Heller, the prominent New York art collector and dealer who's been credited with bringing artists including Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Barnett Newman to the fore, commissioned Olga when it came time to do his own portrait.

Olga says her favorite portraitists include the 20th Century Italian painter Pietro Annigoni, the French Neoclassical master Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and the American John Singer Sargent. "But I really have to add that Ronald Sherr, who unfortunately passed away last year, is as important - at least for me - as those giants! With Ingres, the person emerges from a mass of colors. Ron showed me how visible brushstrokes can bring even more to the portrait."



Olga philosophizes, "As I said, the eyes are the key. It's the point of highest contrast in the whole painting. The White is real white and the Black for the Iris is pure black. ...But every painter does that...the thing is where to stop.
**WHEN DO YOU SEE THE PERSON?
...THE OLDER I GET, THE MORE I SEE PEOPLE."**