



MICHAEL FEINSTEIN WITH CJO Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra

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A delicate art: portrait painting

By: Kevin Davis February 20, 2006

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George San Jose commissioned a portrait of his wife, Jennifer, and it now hangs over their fireplace. "It really captures my wife," Mr. San Jose says of the portrait by Barrington artist Connie Szerszen. Photos by John R. Boehm Photo by:

George San Jose wanted to honor his wife in an unusual and artful way. "I always had this idea that I would get a portrait of my wife and put it above the fireplace," he says. "She's so beautiful, and I feel a painting is so different from a photograph because it can capture the soul of a person."

Mr. San Jose's wife, Jennifer, was reluctant to pose. "She's very humble," he says. "I convinced her. I said, 'Honey, it's something we can cherish forever and share with the kids.' "

Mr. San Jose, president and chief operating officer of Chicago-based San Jose Group, a Hispanic marketing agency, commissioned Barrington artist Connie Szerszen to create the oil painting. Ms. Szerszen is among artists in the Chicago area who do professional portrait work.

Although artists such as Ms. Szerszen frequently paint serious, traditional portraits, their work is not limited to canvases of white-haired company founders or family scions, destined to hang in lobbies, offices or grand hallways. They paint everything from CEOs to family pets.

After Mr. San Jose's wife agreed to pose, Ms. Szerszen visited their home and took dozens of photos to prepare. About two months after commissioning the piece, Mr. San Jose received the finished painting, which was placed in an antique, gold-leaf frame he bought for that purpose. "It really captures my wife," Mr. San Jose says. "It's hanging right above the fireplace, and our guests just glow over it."

Choosing a portrait artist is a matter of style and taste. Ms. Szerszen often works in colorful pastels and says her work seeks to capture the "ethereal face" in a photo-realistic style, albeit a flattering one. "You focus on their beauty," she says. "It's done to show them at their best."

Chicago artist Dan Howe, a professional illustrator and painter for 25 years, has done corporate and academic commissions as well as pieces for individual customers. He likens his style to Norman Rockwell, with a sort of retro

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feel to it. "It's straight realism, nothing fancy," he says. "It's a blend of different artists I admire."

Mr. Howe likes to have his subjects pose but knows most people are too busy. He'll often have them sit for an abbreviated session and use a digital camera and video camera to capture different expressions and views.

"You look at the client and decide what's their best side," he says. "You study their gestures, play around with different angles and lighting. If you give them enough time, people will fall into a natural pose. You try to catch people at their best."

Indeed, for the artist, it's no outlet for edginess. Clients sometimes want their features altered — but always for the better. "I've been hired to radically change somebody's look," Mr. Howe says. "One man wanted me to take 25 years off of him."

Ms. Szerszen says, "If they pay for the portrait, I have to give them what they want to see forever and ever."

Pricing on oil paintings varies. Mr. Howe charges from \$4,500 for a head-and-shoulders portrait to \$12,500 for a three-quarter-length pose. Ms. Szerszen charges \$4,000 to \$7,500. Prices can change depending on the size of the canvas and revisions.

Tim Murphy, owner of Tim Murphy Carpentry in Chicago, has commissioned portraits by Mr. Howe of his wife and daughter, as well as a series of his daughter as she grows up.

"They've very vivid but not like a photograph," he says. "It's special. I just love them."

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From this week's Business of Life

George L. San Jose, president & chief creative officer of The San Jose Group, a multicultural advertising agency.

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