

Artistic immortality at the stroke of a brush

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AS CHAIRMAN of the Baltic Exchange, Anthony Cooke knew it was a task he'd have to face sooner or later. So with his two-year term near an end, the 63-year-old arrived at painter Andrew Festing's Notting Hill studio—an attic cluttered with oversize canvases and odd props from old paintings—with some reserve.

"Let's say I was prepared to endure it," says Mr. Cooke, who this July will see his official portrait unveiled at his retirement dinner. "In the end, it was really quite interesting to watch Andrew at work—and a good deal of fun."

The desire for a portrait can be about self expression—something like buying a tailor-made suit—or about preserving an image for posterity. Or it can be about supporting the work of a favorite artist. In recent decades interest in collecting art has soared. At the same time, figurative art, overshadowed by abstract works since the middle of the century, has moved back into the limelight, and a new crop of contemporary artists has rediscovered the portrait genre.

But how to make the experience less daunting? We spoke to artists, agents and clients about how to commission a portrait.

First, be prepared to take it slow. A sought-after portraitist may have a waiting list of six to 12 months, and once the work has started it can take months to complete.

"You have to be prepared to put in the time and give the artist the freedom to create," says Ashley Kibblewhite, a debt syndicator with Merrill Lynch in London, whose own collection includes a dozen contemporary portraits of himself and his wife Anya, a Russian actress. Among the collection is a portrait by the highly regarded hyper-realist Philip Harris, whose microscopic technique and attention to detail left the Kibblewhites waiting a year for the painting.

Commissioned works can be almost any price, depending on the stature of the artist and the size and scope of the painting. The Kibblewhites declined to give the price for their portrait by Mr. Harris, but his double portraits begin at about \$25,000, depending on the size and design of the work, according to agents. Mr. Cooke also declined to name the price paid for his painting, but a typical full-length portrait by Mr. Festing begins at \$16,000, agents say.

For comparison, \$50,000 will guarantee a "world class" artist who is likely to be showing in the National Portrait Gallery in London or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, such as New York-based contemporary artist Yuqi Wang, says Marian MacKinney, president of Portraits Inc., a New York-based gallery and Web site. Artists charging \$100,000 for a portrait are "in a whole other echelon and are among a handful," including British artists Tai-Shan Schierenberg and Paula Rego.

The most difficult step will likely be the first: choosing an artist. Mr. Cooke's experience was easier than most. He knew Mr. Festing from boarding school days when the two played cricket together. The artist's traditional style and reputation as a portraitist—he is the president of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and has painted Queen Elizabeth II—convinced the chairman that Mr. Festing was the right choice.

To make your choice, first educate yourself by looking at art, and especially portraits, in museums. A noteworthy portrait conveys far more than just the image of the sitter. "The viewer sees themselves in the face of great portrait," says artist Justin Mortimer. "The artist brings out the vulnerability of what it is to be human."

London's National Portrait Gallery focuses specifically on the portrait with a collection that traces the development of the style, from 15th-century kings to today's football stars and business magnates. The annual BP Portrait Award features 60 of the world's hottest new portrait artists (on show this year June 14-Sept. 16). The winner of the com-



Andrew Festing paints the portrait of **Lady Soames**, born Mary Spencer-Churchill, in her Order of the Garter regalia at his studio. Right, **'My Dad Eddie,'** by Arran Steen. Below, **'Penny Burgess Smith,'** by Mark Roscoe.



petition is awarded a £25,000 prize and a potential £4,000 commission to paint a portrait for the gallery.

The NPG says most of the artists exhibiting here are relatively unknown and would likely charge between \$1,000 and \$6,000 for a commissioned work.

Meanwhile, London's Royal Society of Portrait Painters exhibits more than 200 portraits in its annual exhibition April 16-May 13, featuring new works by society members and selected works by nonmembers (www.therp.co.uk).

Next, search the Web. "Traditionally, people found portrait artists by personal recommendation. That's changed. People want a choice, and the Internet offers them the ability to see a range of different artists' work," says Greg Page-Turner, a London-based artist's agent and founder of the Web site Commission a Portrait (www.commissionaportrait.com).

Sites such as Commission a Portrait and Portraits Inc. (www.portraitsinc.com) offer a huge range of artists—Mr. Page-Turner's site represents 200 artists and Portraits Inc. around 140—from the traditional to the avant garde. The sites show examples of the artists' works, provide biographical and contact details and a general price list for commissioned paintings.

Be prepared to put in some legwork. "To really judge the quality of the art, you need to see the real thing," says Mr. Kibblewhite. Color, brush stroke and scale are best seen in the original. Send an email to artists who interest you and ask where their works can be seen—either in galleries or on a studio visit. Galleries are the best way to size up fresh new talent and get a sense of what price an artist's work is going for on the open market.

If you like an artist's work—whether in portraits or other subjects—don't be afraid to ask if he or she takes commissions. "I say dare to ask," says artist Justin Mortimer, who won the BP Portrait prize in 1991. "It would be fantastic if people excited by the art approached a funky young artist to do a

the commission. The agent typically takes a fee from the artist (usually about 30% of the commission), not the client.

"When you commission a portrait there shouldn't be any surprises," says Anabel Elton, head of commissions for the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. "An agent can help you get what you want for what you want to pay."

To find an agent, check with organizations such as the Royal Society of Portrait Artists, the American Society of Portrait Artists, Commission a Portrait and Portraits Inc. While they represent a stable of artists, they should be willing to help you find other artists as well, according to Mr. Page-Turner.

Every artist works in different ways and at different paces. Some want the sitter to pose live; others work from photographs. Some insist on the freedom to choreograph the scene; others allow the subject to arrange the setting. Agree on the goals up front—do you want to control the look of the portrait, or do you want the artist to create something from his or her vision?

"People who come to me for a portrait have to trust me as artist. They take a risk," says Mr. Mortimer, whose bold style and blazing colors have attracted clients such as David Bowie and model Stella Tennant.

On meeting a new client, Mr. Mortimer says he shoots about 70 digital photos and tries to "collect clues about the personality" of his subject. "For me that tingle of excitement comes from getting the sitter's emotional side," he says.

Mr. Festing discusses the setting in detail with his subject down to whether they'd like a favorite object in the background. Mr. Cooke brought along a bronze bust of Queen Nefertiti. Mr. Festing says a barrister client chose to include his old teddy bear.

But don't try to orchestrate too much; artists say they need freedom to create a singular impression of the sitter at a particular moment. "A lot of artists shy away from portraits," says agent Mr. Page-Turner. "They don't like being told what to paint. When they give in, the result can be awful." Take the case of a Texan oil tycoon who insisted the family be painted in front of his Lear Jet—hardly representative of the contemporary artist's work, says Mr. Page-Turner.

"Above all, portraits should not be taken too seriously," says Mr. Festing. "Have fun; it will come through in the painting."