

Portraits by Shoshannah Brombacher, PhD, Part 2



Shoshannah Brombacher paints her portraits with many of the ideas discussed in the first part of this blog in mind. Let's look at her approach with some samples.

1. *The lovers* was made in the early years after her marriage, which brought her from the academic world of Berlin to the (Lower) Eastside of New York. Moving to America had a deep impact. She had read about it, but was not prepared for the culture shock. This portrait shows a couple surrounded by the streets and bridges of her fascinating new city, attributes of her art such as paint brushes and an easel, as well as visualizations of poems she read at the time. It was a time of looking admiringly at the bridges of her new town, but walking around like an immigrant.

In Europe the artist was an academic who painted, but after moving to New York and

painting while raising children she became an artist with an academic background. The colors are upbeat and optimistic, together with the jumping horse they express the happiness and enthusiasm of the couple.

2. This is a portrait of the artist and her muse, made around the same time. It shows the artist in the basement of a synagogue at the Lower Eastside of Manhattan, where she set up a studio. Her husband stepped by regularly, to look, talk, inspire her while she was at work, and bring coffee, hence she dubbed this painting *A Mon Muse (To my Muse)*. Although it is a fairly realistic rendering of her darkish studio with its sagging walls and crumbling ceiling, the vibrant colors of the mood message dominate the picture. In this work her own paintings hang on the walls. The circus-artists from a canvas she was working on at the time have escaped their



frames and do summersaults on the floor. The painter is expecting her first child, which makes her happy.

3. This portrait of the artist's father is a classic portrait, clearly showing his physiognomy together with attributes of his profession: a professor of chemistry and medicine in the traditional red gown of his university in Holland.



4. This portrait of the artists's father shows him seated at his desk in his study, in his familiar pose. The hexagonal refectations in the window refer to chemistry formulas. The German text (*The Letter Shin*) refers to the first Hebrew letter he taught his daughter at a very young age, the ψ *shin*, with his

explanation about the diacritical dot, which impressed the young child greatly. The first portrait shows the professor as he is, the second shows more how the artist sees him.

5. This portrait of the daughter of the artist at a young age was made in New York. Channah sits at a table with her cat Moortje. A peacock quill, an inkwell and books allude to Channah's love for poetry and literature. The style of the painting and the dress are reminiscent of the early twentieth century, which the artist chose because it best expresses her mood and the character of her daughter at the





time. Brombacher often paints contemporary people in historical settings, for this reason.

6. This portrait was painted shortly after the artist's son Yoni was born. The artist was at times homesick, pondering about her life in Berlin, the city she lived and worked before coming to New York, and Amsterdam. The baby floats over the nightly city with the Siegestaule monument on the Grosser Stern, Palace Charlottenburg, which she lived next to, and the skyline of former East Berlin. This portrait expresses the mood of the artist better than that of her subject.

7. This is a self-portrait of the artist wearing her characteristic bordeaux-red velvet beret, with her two small children. The painting was made in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The artist went through a hard time (housing, money, everything), which is expressed by the posture (being detached and floating over the city) and the colors, from ink black to upbeat white and dawn peach/



pink. The black sun refers to a Russian poem of Osip Mandelstam. The artist likes to combine portrait art with literature and music, in case of a commission after consulting with commissioners, of course.

8. This following paintings is an old self portrait (one of the very few) the artist made when she lived in Berlin. The colors and the trees were chosen to express the mood of the moment.



9. This is an old oil pastel drawing (1983) of the mother of the artist, with her cat Athos. The image is realistic, the colors cool and warm at the same time.

10. But years later she painted her mother, now older and grayer, in the style of a seventeenth century Dutch portrait, which both the artist and her mother love very much. It has a characteristic oval vignette, a coat of arms (in this case of the Dutch town where the mother spent her childhood), and

states her age in Latin, as was customary. Behind the mother is a table with her beloved flowers, roses, which doubles as an allusion to the name of the artist, Shoshannah. Her beloved cat Mickey (-not the same cat as the one in the oil pastel drawing above-) sits on her lap. He passed away many years ago but lives on in the painting. Although this painting looks like a seventeenth century work, the artist painted her mother as she knows her, with her preference for the color blue and her friendly expression, unlike the rather stern portraits of the seventeenth century. The eyes are cast down and directed at the cat, which is also unusual for that period.



11. Till now you saw portraits of real people. But *The Ancestors* is a fictional portrait which resembles a real portrait. These people do not exist. Many Americans with Eastern European roots, however, “recognize” their family in this fictional work. In many cases they do not have photographs of their (great/grand/)parents from the Old World, and imagine their relatives might have looked like *The Ancestors*. The couple in the painting can be everybody’s great-grandfather Zwi Hirsch and great-grandmother Esther Shprintzah from the shtetl.



12. This is a portrait of the grandmother of the artist's husband. She passed away when he was ten years old, so he has only childhood memories of her apartment with the boarder (to the left), and the kitchen where she used to sit with an open siddur in front of her. The blurry photo of this grandmother he showed the artist did not help much, but the stories her husband told her were so lively that she was able to make this portrait. The grandmother is surrounded by her own tales about her life at the Lower East Side of Manhattan and her memories of Eastern Europe where she was born. Many of these stories are so generic that the artist could fill them in with her knowledge about the social circumstances in that part of New York.

13. The following painting was commissioned by a Brooklyn-based American family with Hungarian roots. They wanted a portrait of themselves in a seventeenth century Dutch setting, although they have no connection to Holland. That's no problem. The artist is



Dutch and very familiar with this type of paintings. She has lived in a seventeenth century house in Holland and knows all the details. The commissioners were very

happy with this piece.

14. The family in the *Dutch Interior* painting the artist knows personally, but then she got a commission from a family which she had never met until after the drawings were finished. Somebody from Toronto asked her to paint and describe her own ancestors who originated from several Eastern European countries and later settled in Israel, South Africa and Canada. Is this a 'portrait'? That is debatable, because although the drawing shows many family members of the



commissioner it is not a group portrait, and also depicts events in their lives, their cities, houses, etc. The artist saw some but not all family members in photos. Therefore some of these people are represented by images of biblical namesakes with their symbols and

attributes. The main goal of this drawing is not to show a gallery of people with their correct physiognomy, but to visualize a family history spanning several centuries, four continents, and a lot of traveling. The description of the two drawings will be posted in this blog. The work consist of two large panels: Eastern Europa and South Africa (1) and Israel and Canada (2).

15. There are portraits of somebody the artist never met personally but knows well from other portraits, like the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza. When she made this



painting, her goal was not only to show his face, but to visualize the ideas in his philosophical magnum opus, the *Ethics* as well. Portraits like this one need a longer explanation than these few lines, and this will be discussed in a future blog. Brombacher will explain the colors and symbology in this work, and the many scenes of Spinoza's life.



16. Brombacher made a series of portraits of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Although she never met him personally she is very familiar with his portrait, which hangs on basically every wall in Crown Heights, NY, and elsewhere in the Jewish world in photos, paintings, lithographs, etc. She based some of her paintings on an old black and white photo of the Rebbe and his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, taking a stroll in the Austrian woods in Europe. In this photograph the Rebbe is only visible till the waist. The artist opted for a wintery setting because it was snowing in Brooklyn when she was painting this work and snow-covered branches were visible from her studio. She chose a realistic style.

17. But for another painting, based on the same photo, she chose an impressionistic style, playing with sunlight and shadows in colorful woods in summer.

18. This is an example of a portrait that looks realistic, but it is not. The famous Baal Shem Tov, founder of Chassidism, has been described in stories, but there is no known contemporary

portrait. The one that is often shown in books about the Besht is a later, fictional rendering, just like this thirty something year old work of Brombacher.

How to commission a **portrait painted by Shoshannah Brombacher?**

This involves good communication about your taste, about the person you want to be portrayed, and about the size and medium: oil on canvas, pastel and /or ink on paper. The samples show that it is possible to paint a person in the costume and surrounding of different historical settings. Her prices are very reasonable. Her studio is in Brooklyn, NY, and she ships world wide.

Email her at: shoshbm@gmail.com, or phone her: 718-339 2779

