

Editorial

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Presidents in the palm of their hands

TN couple find unique niche in tiny portraits

By David Laprad

As Americans spend the next year watching the larger-than-life figures who will be vying to be the next president of the United States, Wes and Rachelle Siegrist will be wondering if one of them will have the opportunity to shrink the victor down to a size that would fit in the palm of his or her hand.

The husband and wife share more than a last name; they also share a passion, as well as considerable talents, for creating miniature paintings, including portraits of U.S. presidents. If visitors to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., must step back to fully absorb that museum's life-size painting of George Washington (the "Landsdowne Portrait"), then those who view the Siegrists' portraits must lean in, closely, and peer through a magnifying glass to see the breathtaking details in their creations.

From the graying waves of George W. Bush's hair to the yellow undertones that help to define Barack Obama's skin tone, and from Donald Trump's smile to the wizened cracks that stretch across Joe Biden's face, all of the details are there, packed into an oval portrait that could double as a brooch.

"Obama was my favorite president to paint," says Rachelle, 53, who once created a portrait of a Masai herdsman whose head was smaller than Abraham Lincoln's relief on the U.S. penny. "His skin tone is beautiful. When you look at a person, you see the whole human being, but when you paint someone, you study the details, like the gradient in their eyes. Obama was fun to paint because of all of the warm colors."

The heads of state the Siegrists have painted are part of a collection of miniature portraits of U.S. presidents on display at the Woolaroc Museum & Wildlife Preserve in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. The project began life as the private collection of Diamond Jim Brady, an American businessman who in 1914 commissioned artist A.J. Rowell to paint a series of presidential miniatures. The set changed ownership over the years, and expanded to include the contributions of additional artists before arriving at the Woolaroc.

The Siegrists work from their home in Grandview, a log house that stands a stone's throw away from a back road that snakes through a remote timberland. Rachelle playfully calls it their "little wooden box in the woods."

The couple painted their presidential portraits, however, at their previous home in Townsend. This also is where they were living in 2012, when they visited the Woolaroc with a wildlife art group they'd formed and first saw the presidential miniatures.

Wes and Rachelle were already accomplished miniaturists at the time but had never heard of the Woolaroc's collection. Awestruck, Wes gave the museum a copy of his and his wife's "Little Black Book," a collection of human miniatures they'd painted, to encourage the museum to commission them to continue building its collection of presidents.

Impressed, the Woolaroc did ask them to replace its portrait of Bush. "The artist had painted it on canvas, which looked terrible," Wes, 57, recalls.

Wes is sitting at the table where he and his wife eat, a miniature of a parakeet they once owned looking over his shoulder from its frame on the wall. Above the bird is a picture Wes painted of his wife kissing the bird's little beak as it's perched on her shoulder. He titled it "My Darlings."

Wes' portrait of Bush was up to the Woolaroc's elevated standards, as were Rachelle's subsequent portraits of Obama, Trump and Biden.

One of the uncanny qualities of the portraits is the unbroken skin, which lacks the brushstrokes that can be visible on large paintings. Although Bush's features are clearly painted in Wes' portrait, as if it were a photo in which every feature was in perfect focus, it still has a natural quality.

Meanwhile, Rachelle bathed her three presidents in warm light and used a soft focus, which is her style, she says. This makes the crow's feet that stretch out from Biden's smiling eyes seem even friendlier than those on Bush's face.

This attribute is a product of the technique Wes and Rachelle employ to bring their creations to life. While they do use tiny brushes that come to a fine point, they generally don't utilize short strokes to paint the features of their presidents. Instead, they dab their surfaces with countless minuscule dots of watercolor paint and then apply multiple layers of these marks to create facial features and skin tones.

"Every dot is about one-64th of an inch in diameter," explains Wes. "We place those marks on top of each other to achieve the right look."

"We do a basic wash to establish the skin tone and then add more and more layers, gradually darkening, darkening, darkening to build cheek structure and eyebrows," adds Rachelle. "When you look at the painting through a magnifying glass, it's very smooth."

Both artists refer to an official portrait when painting a U.S. president, though Rachelle asked for an alternate on one occasion. "I didn't like the picture they sent me for Trump," she recalls. "He looked mad, so I convinced them to send me a different photo."

For such small works of art, the labor can be back-breaking, says Wes, who keeps a caring eye on his wife while she's painting and occasionally tells her to stand and step away. Rachelle says she's usually grateful for the reminders.

"I have an attention deficit problem, but I can focus when I'm painting. I zone in and lose track of time."

Looking at Wes and Rachelle's his-and-her easels, which sit together on a table placed at a wide window that overlooks their backyard, one can imagine how easy it would be for them to shut out the surrounding room and descend into the small space where they render worlds with the end of a petite brush and nearly imperceptible daubs of paint.

Before the Siegrists welcomed the U.S. presidents into their home, they painted birds, mammals, fish, still lifes and fully featured landscapes on their diminutive canvases. Their work was popular among their peers, as well as art enthusiasts, who referred to them as "the miniature painters," Wes says. Although the excellence of their work suggested a lifelong devotion to the craft, they actually didn't begin painting miniatures until later in their careers.

Their venture began as a means of improving their finances. Like many artists, Wes and Rachelle loved to create, but found it a difficult way to make a living. At their peak of creating regular paintings of marine and wildlife scenes in the 1990s, they were traveling to about 30 shows a year and earning a decent income, but this business model became less and less viable as their travel expenses increased.

"At first, we had to sell one painting to break even, and then it was two paintings, and then three," Wes recalls.

"It cost us \$2,000 to just set up at a show in Charleston," Rachelle adds.

They were living in Florida at the time. One day, an application for a show from the Miniature Arts Society of Florida arrived in their mailbox. Without sensing the serendipitous nature of the envelope, Wes chaffed at the exhaustive list of rules to which submissions needed to adhere and tossed it into what he calls "the black hole" – Rachelle's cluttered work space.

Then came the day he was alone at home, bored and looking for something to do. Recalling the prospectus, he fished it out of the black hole and decided to try his hand at creating a miniature, which needed to be one-sixth the actual size of his subject.

Wes selected a photograph of a burrowing owl that lived in their backyard and went to work. "It took me a few hours to paint it," he remembers. "I had a ball. When Rachelle came home, she saw where I'd placed it in the studio and said it was adorable."

"It was really cute," Rachelle says, drawing out the "r."

Rachelle joined Wes in painting miniatures and the couple submitted their works to the show, most of which the society accepted. When they sent new works the following year, Rachelle won an honorable mention.

Meanwhile, the Siegrists continued to struggle financially. Their fortune began to turn, however, when the president of the Miniature Arts Society introduced herself to them at an art show in Florida and invited them to attend one of the group's miniature shows.

When Wes and Rachelle arrived at the event, the enormous crowd stunned them.

"It was a feeding frenzy," Rachelle says. "People were covering paintings with their hands and shouting for the docents to come over to them. And they were fighting over the paintings and grabbing the people who were writing up the sales by their clothes and pulling on them."

As Wes viewed the unruly scene with a dropped jaw, an idea struck him like a bolt of lightning.

"I saw the wildlife paintings that were at the show, thought ours were better than most of them, and told Rachelle we need to change our focus."

For months, Rachelle painted only miniatures. They then used their meager funds to travel to a regular art show in Charleston, where their tiny paintings made a bigger splash than the larger works on display, Wes says.

"We went from arriving with an empty wallet to leaving the show with \$5,000 in our pocket."

In the years that followed, the Siegrists found even greater success. Although they'd sold their works at the Charleston show for \$75, Rachelle eventually sold a miniature of a hissing cockroach for \$2,500.

Rachelle grins as she describes the work. "It's called 'The Nutritional Expert.' The cockroach is sitting on top of an old can of spaghetti that's rolled over so the nutritional chart is showing. The lighting is beautiful. I put \$2,500 on it because I wanted to keep it, but a collector bought it. It's hanging on their dining room wall."

While art history is populated with lone wolves whose genius recast the shape of their craft, many creative duos have made their mark, as well, notes a 2016 article on Artsy.net. The 20th century in particular saw several pioneering pairs "grasp one side of a loaded bow and arrow and lean back," wrote Alexxa Gotthardt in a piece titled "7 Great Artist Duos That Shaped Art History."

Seeing Wes and Rachelle as a pioneering pair is easy. Although they produce works individually, they labor side-by-side, work together to succeed, and never consider a single work to be complete until the other agrees it's done, Wes says.

Their intimate understanding of each others work includes both strengths and weaknesses or, rather, those qualities as the other perceives them. Rachelle calls the grass in her husband's paintings "magical" but says she'd soften his portraits if it were up to her; Wes says he admires his wife's ability to excel at challenges outside of her skillset, but gently chides her discomfort with chaos, which he says an artist needs to embrace to paint natural-looking grass.

"I do sometimes overwork things," she concedes.

The Siegrists do have their differences. While Rachelle can disappear into a painting for hours, Wes' business-oriented mindset compels him to step back and study the bigger picture. However, at the center of their union is a mutual love for painting wildlife.

"We can both see the beauty in a little orange mushroom that's growing on clump of moss backlit by the sun," Rachelle says. "It's like we share the same set of eyes."

Wes and Rachelle both came to love painting at an early age and developed their talents through practice and education. Wes learned his craft after his parents purchased him a set of instructional books and a paint kit, while Rachelle spent her childhood "painting, painting, painting."

"I'd sit at an easel and make a mess," Wes remembers. "My mom would rotate the braided rug on the floor every few months to hide the paint stains."

"I loved to color as a little girl, and would make my mom color with me, which she'd graciously do for hours," Rachelle recalls. "I'd fuss at her when she went outside the lines. I've been detail-oriented from early on."

If there's a black mark on the Siegrist's miniature enterprise, it's the array of vile comments Rachelle received when she posted her painting of Biden on Instagram. She was proud of her work, she says, but the "unreal" nature of responses left her reeling.

"People were nasty," she frowns. "Even if you don't like what this person stands for, or this person as a president, set aside your opinions and appreciate this as a work of art instead of attacking me. I took it personally because, whether I want to or not, I put a part of myself in each painting."

This distressing experience did not diminish Rachelle's eagerness to paint a miniature of the next new president, whether a fresh face enters the White House in 2025 (unlikely, Wes says, since both of the frontrunners in the current race have already held the office) or 2029.

Rachelle says she would love to see a female win the seat in the Oval Office.

"I was excited at the beginning of Biden's term with Kamala Harris about someday painting America's first woman president. As a female miniature artist, how cool would that be?"

The next painting to be added to Wes and Rachelle's gallery won't be an American president, however, but a lowlier creature.

"We have a photo of a toad that lives in our greenhouse in the winter," Rachelle says. "He'd climbed into this little bowl of dirt and blended in perfectly. It's going to be a great painting."

The only question now is who gets to put the toad, which they named Einstein, to canvas.

"If you want to paint him, you paint him," Wes offers generously. "But if you aren't going to paint him, he's mine."



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