



Portraits That Mean Something

Jane Robbins, Sculptor

An Interview with K. E. Watt

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"I've been a portrait sculptor for years," says [Jane Robbins](#), of Shrewsbury, Shropshire, UK. A single mother, she says she is always "on a crust," running from one commission to another—"I'm mommy and daddy! I'm it!" Not for nothing—Robbins runs from one commission to another because her sensitive portraits are in demand. But that is work which she now calls "nice stylized realistic portraits," and her modus operandi is about to change. Robbins has recently joined portrait painter Mark Gilbert as Artist-in-Residence of the [Facial Surgery Research Foundation](#), founded in 2000 by maxillofacial surgeon Iain Hutchison, of St Bart's and the Royal London Hospital.

Trained in both sculpture and theater arts, first at London Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and then at Stafford Art College, Robbins specializes in figurative sculpture, working in bronze as well as durable materials, creating memorial statues and portrait busts, both large scale and intimate. Her clients are corporate, public and private, and she counts many prominent sitters among her personal friends. In a life-work notorious for hard-to-please customers, those who sit for this sculptor relish the chance to see themselves through her keen and generous eye.

In 1998, when former Beatle and music legend Sir Paul McCartney lost his wife of nearly thirty years to cancer, it was Jane Robbins that he called upon to sculpt the life-size bronze memorial figure of Linda McCartney, which stands now in a memorial garden in Campbeltown, on Scotland's Kintyre Peninsula. "People who didn't know her well," said Sir Paul at



the time, “only ever saw the tip of the iceberg. She was the kindest woman I have ever met; the most innocent.”

“With his budget,” remembers Robbins, about the scramble for the McCartney commission, “everyone was on the bandwagon. And Paul said to me, ‘I want a figure of Linda, but I want it done by someone who knew her and loved her. Someone who can remember her when she was alive.’ Working posthumously, you have to sculpt what you know of the person who once was, who is now absent. I’d known Linda all my life, and I was able, for instance, to choose an age for the sculpture of her, that I thought people would recognize, from my *own* memory. And I was able to depict this person who’s been through something God-awful like [cancer], and recapture her dignity.” That kept Robbins busy from 2001 into 2002. She was primed and ready for the inspiration that struck, one summer evening in 2003.

The BBC Two documentary [What Are You Staring At?](#) aired in August of 2003, telling the harrowing personal stories of several people with facial disfigurements. Some of the faces were misshapen due to natural deformity, some in the aftermath of disease or surgery. Some had been devastated by violent unnatural calamity—an accident or a crime. Many people featured had chosen to have their faces rebuilt, while others were adamantly against surgery.



The documentary focused, in part, on the pioneering initiatives of maxillofacial surgeon Iain Hutchison, founder of the [Facial Surgery Research Foundation](#). With an unorthodoxy which many have come to associate with him, Mr Hutchison has made fine arts a keystone of his Foundation. Tellingly, one of the fledgling charity’s first expenditures went to underwrite its first Artist-in-Residence, portrait painter Marc Gilbert, setting aside studio space for him in the basement of the Royal London’s School of Dentistry. Some seventy portraits by Gilbert of Mr Hutchison’s patients are now gaining international renown, in a traveling exhibit called “Saving Faces.” Its title a shorthand for the Foundation itself, the exhibit has steadily met Mr Hutchison’s buoyant expectations—not just that it would advertise the Foundation and encourage charitable giving, but that the act of sitting for a portrait might somehow deeply engage his patients’ broken spirits,

enhancing their complex recovery, and then, too, that the portraits would captivate and enlighten an under informed public about the disfigured among us.

“Now that’s worthwhile,” thought Robbins when she saw the documentary on television, “because it makes a business of doing portraits that *mean* something! I phoned to express my interest, and Iain approached me, shortly after, asking if I could do a three dimensional version of what [portrait painter Mark Gilbert] is doing.”



Robbins confesses to growing weary of the usual commissions, of “tweaking every flaw to look better in some way, or thirty years younger...” She illustrates, “I have a gentleman, very posh, who said as I was about sculpt his wife, ‘Do lose a little of the gooseflesh, will you?’” In deference to the usual contractual realities, the sculptor makes an effort to accommodate such suggestions. Still, she sighs, “it just feels a bit like selling your soul. In contrast, it’s just been *great* to do *real* faces—*real* people. Not to sound too corny....” she demurs.

This is no ordinary job opportunity, and no ordinary artist will do. The ideal candidate, explains Robbins, must have attained a secure skill level, “which takes years. You can’t be straight out of college, you can’t be practicing technique. You must already have honed your craft. It’s not something you can ‘try out for awhile.’” Too, the artist must be completely comfortable with the exquisitely vulnerable relationship between artist and model. “You are dealing with people’s lives here, in working with these patients. You can’t be a kid.” Robbins describes one adult patient of Mr Hutchison, “a Kurd, who was beaten by a Turkish soldier in the jaw with a rifle butt when he was very little. His jaw was never mended at the time. So it fused as it healed, and hasn’t grown since then.” She will sculpt his portrait, once before, and once after his surgery to rebuild his face, which will change his life. She will come to know him—the way he was, the way he is, the way he may become—inside as well as outside—and her art will help him to see himself, perhaps as he is seen.

“What’s more,” says Robbins, “this is on-call work. The artist may have to be in on the operation, in order to get a feel for what’s going on. Just yesterday I was due to be

somewhere else far away and then Iain [Hutchison] rang me up, and I had to quickly change my plans and race to hospital....”

In the operating theater, Mr Hutchison often makes generous way for his artists to observe his patients during surgical procedures. They make notes, sketches, or photographs for reference, documenting the metamorphosis of his patients, their models. Turning the hospital experience quite literally inside out, they thus begin to develop a powerful bond, that informs the artwork—and even patients themselves. For during long hours of modeling for his portrait, a patient’s most intimate conversation and reliable information about his ordeal often comes from the artist herself, who was there. “It’s getting the balance right that’s crucial,” says Robbins.

Because there is no salary, and artwork done for the [Facial Surgery Research Foundation](#) is not for sale, Robbins continues to pursue her career with commissions that often take her far a-field. But she remains within range of the Foundation, because she values the opportunity to have her work seen, as part of the “Saving Faces” Exhibit, more highly than the advertising cold cash could buy.

“Like any artist, you want your work to be seen. And you worry that it’s never going to be, ever. So to be able to do good work that’s important, *and* to get my work seen, is just fantastic. People will see the work there at the exhibition. The commissions that pay for me to continue doing this work will follow from that. And if I were to become known for just my work at the Foundation, I would be delighted. It’s just such an honor, to be involved in it all. ”

Read more about sculptor Jane Robbins at <http://janerobbins.com>