

THE SECRET OF FACES

Interview with Edgar Jansen about faces and portraiture, by Christel Devue.

Christel Devue is a researcher in cognitive psychology from Liège (Belgium) studying the perception of faces and currently working at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She initiated the Portrait Laboratorium, a website devoted to faces and portraits.

Amsterdam, May 2011

I have conducted an interview with Edgar Jansen, a portrait painter and teacher from Amsterdam, in order to get his point of view as an artist about faces and portraits. At this occasion, I have visited him in his atelier in the heart of Amsterdam. This place is stuffed with portrait art: paintings on the walls, a wet canvas on an easel, portfolios full of drawings, piles of sketches and tables with art equipment and palettes. With faces and portraits everywhere, this is a materialized example of a portrait laboratorium!

Notice: please note that this interview is not meant as a scientific investigation and that the statements about face processing and recognition expressed in this interview only reflect the opinion and the personal experience of Edgar Jansen as a portraitist.



1. The portrait laboratorium of Edgar Jansen

Edgar, when did you start to draw portraits?

I have started drawing when I was fifteen, mainly houses, trees and landscapes but occasionally portraits. I still got a self-portrait from that time. When I was sixteen I took my first drawing lessons at an art group in Laren, a village of farmers, artists and millionaires. At this group, once, an old farmer modeled. With his big white moustache, black cap and traditional clothes, he looked like a character from another century. During this session I have made a lot of charcoal sketches and finished half of my sketchbook which I got from Santa Claus. It was so much fun to do! I think that at that moment my love for faces and my passion for portraits have started. There is always some kind of excitement when you try to draw a person in real life. Also the fact that is not easy to draw a

portrait which is similar to the one sitting in front of you, that this person have limited time and patience, and will react on the result, makes it feel like a challenge.

Later, at school, my Latin teacher liked my charcoal drawing of the blind and bearded face of Homerus so much that he hung it on the wall of the classroom and asked if I could draw his children. At that time, I had no experience at all with portrait commissions. So I asked my grandparents if I could draw them to have at least some more practice in portraiture. Now I realize that it was a bit crazy to draw elderly faces as an exercise for children faces! At the age of 18, I decided to focus on portraiture and took courses at the atelier of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. The teaching was in a very academic way but was a perfect start. The teacher was walking around with a mini plastic skull in his pocket and showed it to explain the volume of the face: "Look how deep the eye sockets are". By the way, his own eyes, below his brushy eyebrows, were also deep in his face!



2. Edgar Jansen in his studio with oil paint portraits

Do you look at faces differently since you make portraits?

Yes, portraiture has made me look at faces differently, but it is now so much part of me that I hardly realize how. I probably look more closely and in an analyzing way. As a portrait painter you never need to feel bored when you are traveling in the train, waiting in an airport lounge, sitting in a café; you can always play the "Face Game". I just enjoy watching people's face: the shapes of their face and their expression. I also look at the pose of their body, even at the position of their feet. This body language can tell a lot about the person. Also the way they dress is a telling fact. So in these situations, I am making a portrait with my eyes and can keep the portrait in my mind. A few years ago I was in Israel and I was fascinated by the faces of the Jewish orthodox men, but it was generally not appropriate to draw them openly. What I did was making a quick sketch of a passing man in the street and directly finished the drawing from my memory.

As a portrait painter you tend to watch, consciously or unconsciously, faces very closely and in a detailed way. You can see every hair that has changed. And you are figuring out with which colors you would paint the portrait, almost already mixing them on your palette. Especially right after a portrait session you can see every face like in a painting. When you are going home in the tram after a session, often you can't help but stare at the passengers' faces. Not a relaxed look but an observing one, so intense that after some time you can see a surprise expression on the face and people wondering: "Hey, what is wrong with me?", or "Want do you want?"

You can also look more selectively, if you are busy with some specific faces. Then you see more of these faces. It happens to me with portrait exhibitions. After visiting a large exhibition of the Russian portrait painter, Ilja Repin, in Groningen, I saw a security guard in the museum lobby: a middle-aged bearded man with a clear, quiet and sensitive expression, exactly the type of person that Repin painted so often. I have had the same experience with an exhibition in Haarlem of the French artist Jean Rustin, who always paints distorted people with the same type of foolish face: a small nose and a big upper lip. At the museum café, there was somebody who looked just like one of these fools, matching these criteria. It is special that art makes you see reality differently.

You say that you are used to look at people's face in detail. Does it mean that you are appreciated for always noticing when a friend changes his/her haircut or get new glasses for instance?

Yes, these things are never unnoticed to me, although I do not always tell. What I mean is that I also see tiny changes in the faces, like different make-up, pimples, a few grey hairs, etc, and if a person did not sleep well or has lost weight.

By the way portraiture is always a combination of dealing with the big shapes and similarly having an eye for details in the face. A portrait should not be just a collection of details but a selection of some details which are essential of the person. A portrait with too many details can be boring, just like a story told in a book with too many pages. Moreover, a portrait painted in a precise and detailed style does not guarantee a good likeness. An expressionist or even an abstract portrait can be more resembling than a hyper realistic portrait.

Do you find it different to portray people you know and people you have just met? Do you look at their faces differently and how do you get to know a new face?



3. Oil painting, 80 x 120 cm

When you don't know a person, you can be more objective and you don't have an emotional connection with the person which can influence your

vision. But then you have to explore the face more. When you do know a person, you recognize more subtle details in the face which are characteristic of the person. With this knowledge, you can make a more complete portrait but on the other hand, it is harder to take distance from the portrait of a person you know very well and to judge it objectively. I often work for a while with the same model because it feels good to be familiar with her face and personality. I like to make a series of different portraits of the same model to show the various aspects of the person (see for instance images 9 and 11). I once cooperated with an Israeli art student, and painted her seven times, in different clothes, poses, and expressions (see images 3 and 10).

Every face has a secret. How comes the face has this specific expression? This is a combination of many things. It is the job of the portrait artist to figure this out and to reveal this secret. With a new face, you can get to know it better during a conversation (you understand the mimics of the moving face) and seeing it from different angles. It also takes time to explore it. So it is good to have different portrait sessions. Most people have different faces, so you can choose an expression or you can combine and summarize the different expressions in one portrait. When there has been time spent observing the person during several sessions, it can result in a portrait with a lot of depth

Which elements of a face do you think are the most important to reach a good likeness?



4. Gipsy, Pencil drawing, 30 x 42 cm

It is generally accepted that the eyes are essential. The personal expression of the eyes, the gaze of a person really matters. But the mouth is just as important. The slightly curved line between the under lip and upper lip is something I like to study closely. It is not only the shape and proportions of the eyes, the nose and the mouth that count, the entire volume and construction of the face is equally important, as well as the position of the head on the body. For instance, does the person have a long neck or is the face low between the shoulders?

Scientists studying faces often distinguish featural information (eyes, nose, mouth) and configural information (the relative position of those elements), or inner features (again, eyes, nose, mouth) and outer features (hair, shape of the head, etc). Some also argue for a holistic view, seeing the face more as a whole. Do these distinctions make sense to you?

When you start a portrait it makes sense to pay attention to the proportions of the inner features, so the shape of the mouth, eyes, nose, their relative size, and the space between them, for instance, the space between the nose and the mouth. The space between the eyes is always considered one eye as a standard. This is what I used to teach my students. However, I found out this is varying a lot

according to each face. Besides, the outer features are equally important. It can happen that the inner features are well represented in the portrait but that not enough attention is paid to the outer features (people often prefer to draw the inner features). The shape of the head, its volume, as well as the hair are equally important as the inner features. Sometimes when a person changes his hairstyle it can be hard to recognize him/her at first sight. Even when the inner features are good, if the total shape of the head is not right, the portrait will not resemble. So I think that the holistic approach makes more sense. Besides the face, the whole body might be important to recognize someone. For instance when you meet a friend at the station in the twilight, you cannot see the face clearly from a distance, but you can easily recognize him by the outer features of his face and body, and also by his style of clothing and the way he walks.

You have a loose style, with a lot of curves, a little bit messy at first sight, but still your portraits resemble the persons. Where does this style come from?

For me drawing feels like writing. So my style of drawing has become like handwriting. In the beginning I was drawing cityscapes very precisely with straight lines. There was no movement in the lines and it looked clean. Later I was drawing with a friend in a grand café every week. People were talking and not sitting still for a moment. In that period, my sketches became more dynamic. My stiff hand turned loose. I have developed a drawing style with 'searching lines' instead of



5. Dancers in a ballet class, Ink drawing, 30 x 42 cm

clean lines. The style can look a bit messy for an inexperienced eye. This method means that in the drawing you can see how I am finding the definitive shapes and essential lines through various lines. Wrong lines are often not erased. (This approach can also be seen for instance in the dance drawings of Degas). I was once drawing a portrait of a model who was a dancer. Afterwards she said "Look, your lines are dancing, you should draw dance" and she invited me to attend and draw a dance rehearsal. Then I got really interested in drawing dance and my style became more moving. The messy style is a reflection of myself. In daily life I am a bit messy and nonchalant as well, though my mind can think in an orderly, structured way. This loose style is something related to my personality. I like to be free, open, and happy but I am basically a quiet, introvert, and even a shy person. In my work I can be more free and spontaneous than I am as a person and I can be more open and express myself. So I have gradually found a style which matches my personality. Finally, I also prefer that my drawings remain a bit sketchy and almost look unfinished. My style is a combination of rough and fine lines. The rough lines are meant to suggest general shapes and movements and some fine lines to specify details. There is still space left for imagination of the onlooker of the drawing. When I have

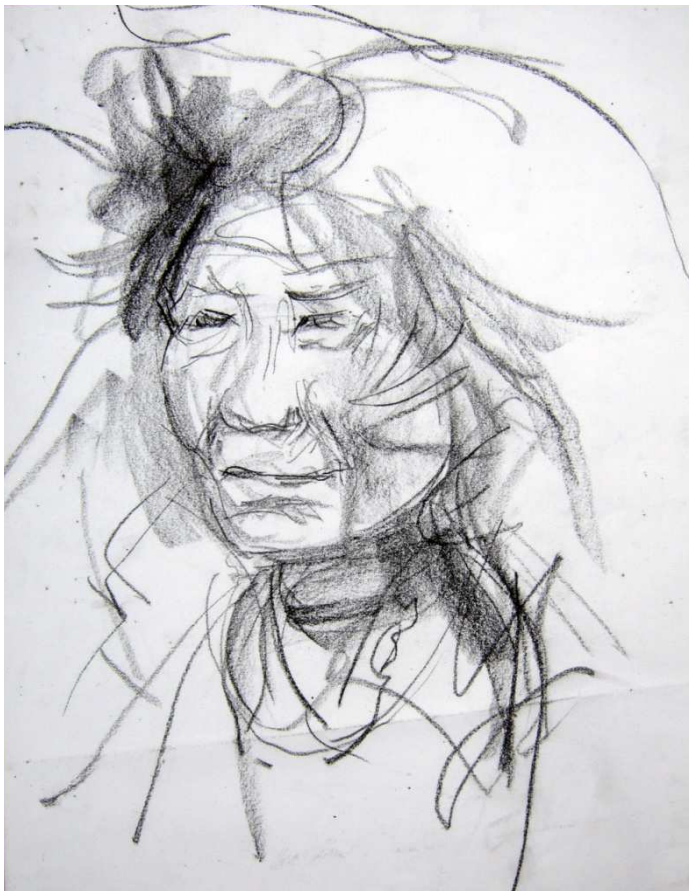
expressed what I felt was the essence, I don't like to polish it, to make it smooth. When you try to make everything in your work too perfect, you can also lose a lot of the expression.

My favorite quote is one by Paul Cézanne: "A portrait is never finished, you can only abandon it."

Are there some circumstances in which you find a face more difficult to draw?

It is always more difficult when the face is in another position, seen from an unusual angle or in a strange light, but mostly I can deal with it and manage to draw these situations as well. What I find hard is to draw a face upside down, for instance with reclining nudes at model sessions. You see the same face, but upside down it is much harder, because your mind is not used to seeing it this way. In dance studios, after a class, I can see dancers lying on the ground to stretch their bodies. Then I see their face in an upside down position and I can hardly recognize them, even the dancers that I know well.

What you just described seems to correspond to the "face inversion effect", well known in cognitive sciences, although its specific cause is still debated. It refers to the finding that inverting a face affects our ability to process and recognize it and this, much more than inverting other objects. Another well established finding is that people usually experience difficulties in differentiating and in recognizing persons from a different ethnic group than theirs (the so-called "own-race effect"). Do you also experience that phenomenon or is each individual face equivalent for you?



6. Pencil drawing of a Tibetan woman, 30 x 42 cm

I also have these difficulties, though probably to a less extent. It is true that it takes more effort to draw an exotic face because you are not used to these different faces. There is always a tendency to draw a face more according to your own race. For instance, it is possible to send your pass-photo to China and let it turn in an oil painting by people of a painting workshop there. The portrait will not be expensive but there is a good chance that your face on the portrait has got slightly Chinese features.

When you are for a longer time in a country, you can differentiate faces much better. For instance, I have been in India and after some time, I could see more difference between people. And when I was drawing Tibetan refugees in Ladakh, in the North, I really started to understand and appreciate this kind of Asian faces more and more. To avoid the

own-race effect, I like to paint people from different ethnic origins. I recently did portraits of a red-haired Swedish woman, a dancer from Siberia and a Korean girl.

Beside the 'own-race effect', there is the 'own-taste effect' with influences the portrait process. Many portraitists in art history have developed a preference for a certain kind of face. They either casted the portrait in the mould of their favorite , 'ideal' face, like Modigliani who painted many portraits with long faces and black eyes; or they selected models who looked according to their taste, like Renoir who worked with young, chubby girls with round faces and gave them a sweet expression and dreamy eyes.

Finally, there is also the 'own-face effect'. People are most familiar with their own face and when an amateur or a professional makes a portrait, there is the tendency to include one's own facial features in another person's portrait. I once was about to tell a student not to make the face too red, but when I looked at his face, he had exactly this same rose complexion that he was painting. Even when the face in the portrait does not have the facial features of the painter, there is always something of the personality of the portrait painter in it. That's why people say: "Every portrait is also a self-portrait". In the portrait, the personalities of the artist and of the model meet each other.

Talking about self-portrait, you have made a first one when you were fifteen. Do you have repeated this experience regularly? Is it technically and emotionally different to draw yourself and other people?

I started young with self-portraits but I did not continue so much with this. I don't know why. Maybe the reason is that I am generally not so focused on myself or maybe I feel shy with my own face. You are right, I should do it more. Emotionally it is different. So of course you are seeing things you know so well, "Oh there is this big nose again", but you also discover new things in your own face, like noticing some new grey hairs. Technically, it is on the one hand easier, as the artist is one with the model. The painter knows exactly what the model feels and needs no words to tell the model what to do. And also, you don't have certain expectations from a customer, so you got more artistic freedom. On the other hand, practically, this is also harder because you can only portray yourself 'en face', and need more mirrors for an 'en profile'.



7. Self-portrait, oil painting, 20 x 30 cm

As I understand, you always draw from life? Do you also sometimes draw from pictures, and what is the reason of your preference?

I think drawing directly from life is much more exciting and challenging. Drawing from photos is not very inspiring for me. For instance, I was observing and drawing people in temples in Bali. During such a moment, I feel the heat, smell the flowers and the incense, hear the sounds of prayers, see the colorful scene in front of me. All those things can affect me and the way I depict the scene. I am

part of the reality I am painting. With copying a photo to a painting, you don't have this kind of experience. It must be pretty boring to make a portrait alone in your studio with a number of printed photos. It can be a riskless job with a lifeless result. While making portraits from life, you've always got company. With life drawing, there is also a risk that the subject or the circumstances are changing during the session, which makes the process more exciting. The person maybe does not sit still, gets tired or has to run away to check her parking ticket. Maybe you cannot find some color tubes you need, the daylight circumstances may change or a neighbor can start to drill the wall. Anyway, I think you should not avoid risk in art.

I did portraits from photos as an exception in case of posthumous portraits of deceased people. Mostly, those portraits were based on all kinds of low quality snapshots (of faces half-hidden behind sunglasses or Christmas candles). This was not easy at all. In the past, I never used photos. It was simply against my principles. Nowadays, I study photos before a portrait session in order to try to understand a face better. Later I sometimes also compare the painting to photos but I seldom work directly from photos. In today's portraiture the works are often based on photography. Some even use a projector to project the image on the canvas and copy it in paint. It is common practice and you can always tell from the result. There comes a photographic rather than a picturesque element in the resulting portrait. A frozen smile on a holiday snapshot looks good in a photo album, but can be annoying in the portrait hanging on the wall. People portrayed on the basis of photos often look like sculptures in a wax museum.

Another thing is that a photo is a flat image. When painting from reality you translate the 3-dimensional information into a 2-dimensional image with a suggestion that it is 3D. Finally, when drawing from photos, it is hard to tell the exact colors. In reality you can easily take a closer look.

You sometimes draw landscapes or other things besides faces. Do you think there are fundamental differences between drawing a face and other things or do you just apply the same technique to everything you draw?



8. Westerkerk, Amsterdam in autumn, Oil painting, 50 x 65 cm

That's a good question. Let me think. When you start a drawing or a painting of either a portrait or a landscape, the same principles apply for colors, composition, light and dark, etc. In the way of painting (e.g. choice of colors) you let yourself influenced by the impression a person or a scene makes on you. With a face however, you have to be more precise with proportions. You can allow yourself more freedom when you are painting clouds or a tree. Moreover, with portraits, there is a person facing you and there is always some kind of dialogue, even when you don't speak. You can influence each other's mood. With a landscape there is no such interaction.

Do you consider yourself as an expert of faces?

Yes, I am experienced with studying and analyzing faces so I can call myself a face expert, more or less. For instance, I am pretty good in estimating age of people, discovering the asymmetry in a face, or seeing family characteristics in a face.

Is it something you had inside of you from an early age, maybe even innate, or is it something you have developed?

I think I have developed it. When I started with my art as an adolescent, I liked to draw outside a lot: village sceneries, trees, etc. Unfortunately Holland does not have a good climate for outside painting (like France for instance), you can only do it half of the year. At the art group where I took lessons, there was sometimes a model available and I always found it very special to do life drawing with a person modeling, also much nicer than still-life. Gradually, I became more interested in portraiture and decided to specialize on it. In addition, there was a famous portrait artist in Holland, Paul Citroen, whose work I admired. So it probably also influenced me. I took portrait lessons, liked it more and more and then really got into faces. I realized that in order to be a good portrait painter, you need to do it very often. So that's how I have developed a special eye for faces.

Do you think your occupation makes you especially good at recognizing people in general (even when you have never drawn them)? For instance, do you recognize actors in movies better than the average? Do you remember faces of friends from a long time ago?

Yes I think so. I live in the centre of Amsterdam and there you can see a lot of well-known people walking around. I always recognize them without any doubt, even when they wear sunglasses. I once recognized a TV personality sited on a terrace, from the back. I do recognize persons from a long time ago. There is not much doubt that I have seen them before. But it can be hard to remember from which context I have known them. Everybody knows this problem.

When one does not see another person for a certain time, our memory for the person's face sometimes seems to fade away. Do you also experience that? Is it less likely to occur when you have drawn the person?

I have got a good visual memory (I think I have developed it by drawing dance and movement). I can work on a portrait from my memory the same day or a few days later, but not a week later though. When you have drawn a person, you have studied the face so well that you will not forget the person soon. However, after a long time it begins to fade. I also tend to forget the faces from portraits I have made a long time ago. What I find striking is that I remember the image of the portrait sometimes better than the face itself. For instance I saw an Israeli friend after ten years again, a girl who had modeled for me. I thought:



9. Oil painting session

“Hey, how come your eyes are much darker than on the portrait?” Also a portrait never grows old, remains at a constant age. So when you remember the portrait and meet the person who has aged in the meantime, it can be a surprise or even a shock.

Do you try to be objective when you draw someone or do you try to achieve a flattering or more “universal” result? For instance, how do you deal with the age of the person? Are you sometimes concerned about people’s reaction when they will see your portrait?

I try to be objective but give myself room for my feelings, which are of course subjective. I am emphasizing the things of the face which I find interesting, beautiful or characteristic of the person. So a portrait is a personal vision of another person’s face. In my portraits, I try to achieve something specific of the model so that it can be recognized but also something of a universal beauty so that is also nice to see for others. With great portraiture you can enjoy a portrait without knowing the person. Nobody of today’s museum visitors has known Mona Lisa or The Jewish Bride personally and they don’t care. These portraits can trigger your imagination to fantasize about these persons. And you recognize some emotions in them which are universal for all times and places.

Of course I am concerned about people’s reaction, especially when it is a commission, but during the process I am not thinking of this. I try to do the job as good as possible, in my way. It is always an exciting moment when the model first sees the portrait. I mostly show it at various stages of the process. I don’t like to wait till the portrait is completely finished. I need a relaxed atmosphere during the process, as I am painting in a free, loose style. Stress is not a good ingredient in the portrait process. There are often high expectations for the portrait. Situations can get stressful when there is a deadline involved or when the portrait is meant as a present for some special occasion.

The painter and the model have different, sometimes conflicting, objectives. The painter is concerned with matters like composition, colors, contrast, in order to make a good painting. The sitter can be primarily concerned with the likeness of the result or just hoping to be depicted in the most favorable way. Portrait customers should realize that a portrait is meant as a piece of art, it is a vision of the artist and not something like a photo on canvas. Portraiture in which the likeness is the one and only purpose are mostly not good and not interesting to look at.

In my portraiture, I like to search the beauty in the face. My women’s portraits always have a lot of ‘elegance’. I do not overemphasize the things in the face which the model probably does not like, for



10. Bride, Oil painting, 80 x 120 cm

instance a double chin or wrinkles. However, when your goal is to flatter, you can lose touch with reality as well as the sense of likeness. If you follow that road you can end up with a Montmartre glamour portrait style, making a movie star of everybody. According to me, the artist then loses his integrity. I just try to draw or paint what I see and feel. In art you should be honest and sincere in your intentions and observations. Art should be real, not fake or flattery.

Does it happen that people do not recognize themselves or their close relatives in your portrait or that they are somehow offended by the way you represent them, and what are the reasons?



11. Oil painting, 60 x 80 cm

The first view of the portrait is always a surprise. It is different than expected and it takes some time to get used to it. When people are not happy with the portrait, it is mostly about some detail. "Am I really looking so fat?", "Isn't my hair darker?", etc. If these comments are right, I am of course willing to make changes.

But what should you do if it is more related to the self-image of the sitter than to reality? People do not always know their own faces well as they mainly know it from the mirror; in other words they mainly see their own face in a frontal view and in a mirror orientation. Therefore, they can be surprised when they see the portrait if it does not fit the image they have of themselves in their mind. Like when they see themselves in a picture or a video, with a pose that they never really see, they say: "Is that me?" People often don't like to see how they look like. Their self-perception is not close to reality. And what should you do when a

mother says that her daughter is always smiling but you never saw her smile during the portrait sessions?

There is a famous example in art history about being offended by a portrait: Graham Sutherland painted Winston Churchill with an expression of a bulldog. It resembled very well but Churchill hated every inch of the canvas. After several years, his wife decided to burn the painting in the back of their garden.

What I always find an interesting reaction is, when people see the facial features of relatives in a portrait, like: "The portrait of my daughter looks exactly like a photo of me when I was young".

Are you sometimes bored with drawing portraits or is each new person that you draw like a new experience/challenge?

No, mostly I still like it a lot. Sometimes, if there is a person with whom I have no connection, no common interest; it can happen that I don't feel inspired. For instance in case I would have to make a

portrait of let's say a football player (not my cup of tea). However, it often happens that a person that did not look so special at first sight becomes more and more fascinating during the process.

Do you think you will always draw portraits?

There was once a student who did want to not continue my portrait course. She said: "I am fed up with all those faces... I have drawn enough portraits now". This will never happen to me. I will remain fascinated by faces and continue to draw them. There are still fields to explore. Maybe I will feel attracted to different kind of faces, for instance exotic or elderly faces, maybe I will portray in a different way. The nice thing is that, now that I master the techniques more easily, I can put even more freedom and feeling in my portraits.

See more of Edgar Jansen's work and read more about him on www.edgarportraits.com

Read more about faces and see Christel Devue's own experiments with portraiture on www.portraitlaboratorium.org

All paintings and drawing displayed are by Edgar Jansen © Copyrights 2011