



Q&A WITH THE ARTIST

Lars Physant and Mette Skougaard

"I am an artist, and I express myself through painting. Art is my whole life; I live to paint, not the other way around." – Lars Physant

MS: *How was your path into the world of art?*

LP: It was a path-defining, fundamental experience in my life when I was 5 years old. I saw my father drawing, after which I copied his drawing; and then one day, hallelujah, I dared to relate directly to what was seen myself—THE VISIBLE. That set the course for my life.

The world opened up further when I discovered the library and, with it, world art. My first inspirations and role models were the Danish Golden Age painters: Christen Købke, C.W. Eckersberg, Lundbye; later the Impressionists and Pointillists; and—when I was around 14 years old—a wonderful new discovery: Abstract Expressionism. A dream to unite the best of all these experiences in the same work felt completely natural to me. This love of synthesizing and experimenting with "uniting" turned out to be essential for me in my artistic work.

At the age of 13–14, I was able to draw portraits from live models. It was purely joyful and straightforward; pure pleasure.

MS: *How did you train as a visual artist? What have been your most significant sources of inspiration?*

LP: I never applied for admission to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. For my greatest artistic role model, Johann Sebastian Bach, being self-taught—or self-learning—was an ideal... But times and ideals change, so it is only in recent years that I have, with pleasure, shared this experience of quality in self-education with others.

The word "autodidact" has in many circles been used in a decidedly derogatory manner. This is naturally infamous; nevertheless, I hope a new word emerges that can capture

the extra responsibility and effort required to be able to "teach oneself." A bit polemically, one might say that being an academy-trained painter in Denmark today is, as far as I am informed, a written guarantee of incompetence when it comes to creating portraits.

In the early 1980s came the first commissions for portrait drawings; later mixed with watercolor, gouache, and tempera, and from 1993, paintings on canvas. Since then, I haven't worked on anything else.

You learn best to create by creating!

A couple of years ago, I was asked about the famous 10,000-hour rule; I did some quick math and arrived at the conclusion that it must be a minimum of ten times that figure in my case to paint as I do—regardless of what one thinks of the results.

MS: How do you view your portrait art in relation to your other works?

LP: For me, there is no sharp division between portraits and "non-portraits." I have painted many pictures containing single or several recognizable faces without them originating from a commission or with portraiture in mind. But a genuine portrait must, for me, contain a high degree of the model's presence and immediacy.

It makes sense to say that in works resembling, for example, landscapes or sceneries—naturalistic or abstract—there is actually a higher degree of self-portraiture; whereas in an actual portrait, there **MUST** be a certain dominance of the person being portrayed.

MS: Where do you place yourself in relation to other portrait painters?

LP: I have deliberately chosen not to learn from or relate directly to living portrait painters. But there is one almost living exception who is far too little known in Europe: the American Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009). His deeply sensitive drypoint tempera technique showed me new paths in acrylic painting. Thanks to him, I learned that almost all expressive possibilities from oil, tempera, and watercolor could be encompassed within the registers of acrylics if you know them thoroughly. Acrylic painting offers enormous freedom, but it requires a great overall perspective. Especially when working with dozens of transparent layers, it takes vast amounts of experience to balance light and color.

If, for clarity's sake, we stick to Danish portraitists, I feel the ideal/sublime particularly strongly in Christen Købke and C.A. Jensen. I would also like to highlight P.S. Krøyer, Laurits Tuxen, J.V. Gertner, and Vilhelm Hammershøi (what a shame he painted so few portraits!). If we expand the scope to sculpture, my work with Bertel Thorvaldsen over the past couple of years has shown me that he was the greatest portrait talent Denmark ever had.

I have had the great pleasure of studying Thorvaldsen's work more closely and, among other things, painted a portrait of him based on his self-portrait in the Nysø Collection. I

am also working on a portrait of Eckersberg based on the bust the sculptor created of him. If we take this portrait bust as an example and compare it to painted portraits of Eckersberg, I am certain that all of Thorvaldsen's 3D recordings come closer to a true likeness of the model. As a gifted sculptor, he saw, processed, and captured far more information than painters were capable of—and it is beautifully concentrated on the open, seeing nature of Eckersberg.

I experience Thorvaldsen's ability to create and recreate human faces as completely overwhelming; an impossibly balanced perspective, both physiologically and psychologically. A fantastic balance between "beauty" and "realism": "*Voir beau et juste*" ("To see beautifully and truthfully") was J.L. David's, and subsequently Eckersberg's, motto.

THE NEW PORTRAIT OF H.R.H. PRINCESS BENEDIKTE

MS: You have now received the commission to create the official portrait of H.R.H. Princess Benedikte for the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle. Do you approach this task in the same way as when you depict other, non-royal individuals?

LP: It is, of course, something truly unique to be commissioned for a royal portrait. It means a lot to me. But purely artistically, I always try to surpass myself in every single new work. I will do that regardless of whom I am portraying. There is the same internal necessity on my part to do my very best.

However, the special circumstance of making a royal portrait for an official collection adds a dimension that I must, of course, take into account and respect. I hope there is a mutual respect regarding the fact that a unique collection of Denmark's collective memory is to be expanded slightly with what I can contribute in that context—it is dizzying, but it does not change the demands I place upon myself.

MS: Does this mean that you place emphasis on depicting or highlighting the official role that the subject holds, which forms the background for the commission at Frederiksborg, or do you wish to create a more holistic depiction without particular emphasis on formal appearance?

LP: I felt it was completely straightforward to let Princess Benedikte herself define her attire, her room, her surroundings, and to let our shared love of light and of Vilhelm Hammershøi—who is represented by a painting in the room—enter and define the purely artistic, painterly aspects.

Regarding the question of insignia of rank, such as orders or no orders, it was clear that formal decorations were not what the Princess was to wear. At the same time, however, she wished to appear in the most royal light, in the most royal presentation—to show herself as a happy representative of the family and community that has been her life, and which she has been accustomed to being part of and working within since childhood.

MS: You have portrayed Princess Benedikte twice before, both as private portraits. Does it mean anything that this is the third time you are painting her specifically?

LP: It is a major and decisive advantage that this is the third time I am painting a major portrait of the Princess. It creates an immediate sense of intimacy between us, a mutual understanding that is immensely conducive to the process.

In relation to the two previous works, it was initially a completely symbiotic wish from both sides that this third work should be just as complementarily different from the two earlier ones as those two are from each other. So we also had to tread new paths, but with the gift of being able to jointly evaluate what had succeeded in the previous ones and what could be improved.

MS: How was the task approached?

LP: It is fundamental to my working method that I prepare numerous preliminary studies. Drawings close to live models—as many as possible—conversations in all directions, often captured in photographs, turning the face and body in relation to THE LIGHT. Constantly trying new compositions and arrangements that could leave the final "word" to the light.

In this specific portrait assignment, which was staged in the Princess's residence at Amalienborg, the low and extremely soft midday light during most of the sittings around the winter solstice led us to praise Hammershøi constantly; we WERE in his ROOM and his LIGHT. The shared experiences between the Princess and me of the delicate shifts in light across a series of the year's shortest days were simply what gave me the direction—and thus the distribution—of light for the overall work.

Later, the placement of the objects in the lower right and the presence of the sofa in the lower left were perfected. ALL OF IT A RESONANCE BOARD FOR THE LIGHT! It is thus clearly the light that dictated/determined the entire division of the canvas surface.

MS: How do you view this third portrait in relation to the two previous ones?

LP: In a way, I feel that this particular portrait has become extremely private compared to the earlier ones because it contains so many private moments from the facial studies I made, which I believe have truly come together in the final face.

That being said, I think what can make the official dimension stronger, better, and more qualified is the fact that Princess Benedikte's life comes together in such a higher unity. In a virtuosic manner, the private sphere and the public sphere are united in the same person; everything converges on that level. Therefore, in my eyes, it becomes the most moving of the three portraits.

I have tried to combine what I feel is the best of each of the other two portraits in this new painting: life-size ("1:1"); visible hands; a comprehensive, accompanying room; and the color red in her attire.

MS: Although there are large differences between the three portraits of the Princess, they share the trait that in all of them, she stands looking directly at the viewer. What is the reason behind that choice?

LP: It is actually the result of many rejections. During the process, I also created a facial study where her gaze was turned away. It is very beautiful and, to me, reflects her acceptance of life, fate, and her specific conditions of life as something wonderful, yet at the same time something that has been immensely demanding.

Even so, from a very early stage in the process, I could not imagine the portrait in any other way than the viewer meeting her gaze directly. Princess Benedikte has a unique capacity for presence and concentration combined with empathy. She is remarkably attentive to everyone present in the room around her, and it is important that this radiates from the portrait—that one gets a sense of this special capability and feeling for presence when looking at the painting.

I also want the eye contact to reflect the Princess's very direct, active, and resolute personality. To further emphasize this character trait, I have placed great importance on her hands, which occupy a central position in the composition.

She is a person who makes things happen; her presence in a room is striking, and from childhood, she has studied the tools that make a situation work. You should feel her majestic persona. It is her human qualities that unite in a higher harmony with the royal element.

MS: You have described the concept of "introspective naturalism" as an important working tool for you—can you describe it in relation to this new portrait?

LP: Introspective naturalism is a supporting element in all my works, including the landscapes. The foundation of the works is always introspection. Perhaps it can be expressed as the canvas surface needing to be impregnated with the inner self that I wish to convey. In connection with creating a portrait, it opens up a special opportunity to mirror oneself in another human being when there is a mutual understanding—it yields something truly unique. I strive for a conscious shift between the outer and the inner, and in meeting the other person, one achieves both an insight into one's own consciousness and, 180 degrees the other way, an invitation to a meeting: a mutual introspection.

In relation to this portrait, the Princess understood the peculiar complementarity of the drawing experience: She has a striking resemblance to her mother, H.M. Queen Ingrid, whom she has always admired and wished to resemble. Conversely, I had to create my own life, my personality, my humanity in a way that was different from my father, who

was a person who wanted something entirely different and whom I did not admire in that sense.

MS: Colors and their symbolism play an important role in your works. In what way have you worked with the meaning of color in this portrait?

LP: The colors have, so to speak, grown out of the light. Right from the very first sitting at Amalienborg, we both—as mentioned earlier—became aware of the delicate nature of the light around the solstice, and this was combined with inspiration from Hammershøi.

The Princess stands so that her left side is illuminated by the warm incandescent light from inside the room, while the other side, facing the palace square, holds a cooler bluish tone—and that is the division present in what I paint.

During the process, I executed 10 preliminary studies of the Princess with different color combinations to paint my way into the color compositions that connect with the final work. For me, this is a tool to capture as much of the soul as possible—to find her essence, so to speak. What is essential is often found in the relationship between different expressions, and the challenge for me is to find it.

MS: Would you tell us more about your painting technique?

LP: I sketch out the face based on the facial study I feel is most successful. After that, I draw the figure, and then I apply colors in very thin layers. There can be over 100 layers; I don't count them. But every single layer matters.

It feels inevitably like a parallel to consciousness and memory storing perception: layer upon layer continuously, and always a higher and higher concentration of energy. I almost always build the painting—not just portraits—using complementary colours to what will become the final colour. This colour is often indescribable because it consists of one colour that has been painted over dozens of times by vibrating, translucent layers of its complementary colour.

MS: What would you like museum visitors tomorrow, and 100 years from now, to experience when they see your portrait?

LP: My goal in life is to try to create works that possess a painterly/artistic strength that can give another human being, who perceives it carefully and intensely, the same depth of experience of LIFE'S CONTENT that I myself have received from Vermeer, Hammershøi, Købke, Matisse, Bonnard, Seurat, Georges de La Tour, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock...

MS: What makes a good portrait?

LP: A fantastic painting to begin with! AND a facial presence that transcends and transmits HUMAN QUALITY. An intense piece of a person's life that has the strength to outlive the lifespan of the body.