

BY MARC DAVIS

# Portrait MARKETING

## FOUR ARTISTS SHARE THEIR SECRETS

**W**hen portrait artist Stephen Bennett met the president of Panama on the Caribbean Island of St. Martin, he offered the head of state a portrait as a gift.

The Panamanian president had seen Bennett's work prior to their meeting because Bennett had boldly reached out to an official of the Panama government.

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1 *Be Dope, Be Proud* by Jami Childers. Mixed media, 24" x 30". Copyright © Jami Childers. Used by permission of the artist. Photo credit: Katie Farrow Grant.





“I had contacted the Panamanian minister of culture, showed him my work and eventually it was shown to President Balladares,” he said.

When Bennett and the president met, rather than accepting the artist’s offer to paint his portrait as a gift, the president commissioned a portrait instead.

“I was surprised to get the commission,” Bennett said. “When the president saw my finished portrait, he loved it and commissioned me to paint 100 more.

“I lived one year in Panama working for the president making portraits of the people there, and the work ended up as a book called *The Spirit of Panama*.”

Bennett is one of the four professional portrait artists profiled here, each with a different approach to marketing, but each is also a meticulous painter who acknowledges the necessity of marketing but asserts that his/her work itself is the best advertisement.

### **BOLD AND CONFIDENT**

Confident is the word that best describes Bennett’s approach to marketing. Besides contacting heads of state — Bennett also painted the president of French Polynesia — he has other techniques to secure commissions.

Contacting five- and seven-star hotels all over the world in writing and asking for exhibition space is another of Bennett’s bold marketing techniques that has proven effective.

“Many of these hotels are happy to let me show my work,” he said. “My portraits decorate their big lobbies and long corridors and make expats who are traveling feel comfortable. My work has become, in effect, an ambassador, and I’ve gotten many commissions through this exposure.”

Recently, Bennett’s globetrotting took him to India. “This is a growing market with an expanding middle class who are prospects for portraits,” he said.



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Bennett has also traveled to Sudan, Nepal and French Polynesia, where he has exhibited his portraits and received commissions from clients who saw his work there.

In October, Bennett plans to visit China at the invitation of Evey Li, activities executive of art education at the new, architecturally unique opera house in the city of Guangzhou, the country's third largest city with a population of almost 13 million.

But exhibiting and marketing abroad is an expensive proposition, Bennett said.

"My trip to Guangzhou will cost about \$15,000," he said. "That includes crating, shipping and insurance. I'm in the process of raising the money now." But commission prospects in China are good, as more of the population acquires wealth.

For portrait artists who don't have the wherewithal to travel to foreign countries, there are less costly marketing methods that can be used in the U.S.

"Networking, encouraging referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations, and writing to prospects are good ways to [promote] your work," Bennett said. "Every exhibit of my work came through someone I met."

2 Fang Fenglei by Marvin Mattelson. Oil on linen, 23" x 31". Copyright © Marvin Mattelson. Used by permission of the artist.

3 Duntrune by Scott Schiller. Copyright © Scott Schiller. Used by permission of the artist.



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When Bennett meets someone interested in his work, he follows up immediately with an email or a letter to the potential client. This method has also produced commissions.

Sometimes the commissions are unsolicited.

Just recently, Bennett received a commission to paint the portrait of Triple Crown-winning jockey Victor Espinoza, who rode thoroughbred champion American Pharoah to its three victories.

“They came to me with the commission,” Bennett said.

Bennett has a website that features a selection of his work but it yields only two or three commissions annually. He also has a Facebook page with almost 3,000 “likes,” which he said generates just a small amount of commission inquiries. These potential clients usually don’t have much of a budget.

He also carries a portable 4-inch-by-6-inch portfolio with him everywhere. The samples are in color on paper and show better than the online pictures, he said.

“I carry the portfolio with me at all times because you never know who you’re going to run into. Show it to everyone recklessly,” he said. “And don’t be intimidated by celebrities and dignitaries.

They’re regular people just like the rest of us.”

And like the rest of us, they probably use credit cards, and so Bennett accepts payment for his work using Visa and Master Card. He’ll also allow a client to pay for a portrait in interest-free installments over a year after an initial deposit.

“The best marketing tool is your work itself,” Bennett said. “I always use the best materials. High-quality stretchers and fine-tooth linen and cotton.”

Bennett also makes his own paint because many of the off-the-shelf brands usually don’t have enough pigment in the binder to satisfy his standards.

When he’s not painting portraits or marketing them internationally, Bennett teaches children how to paint portraits through his nonprofit Faces of the World foundation. The mission of this charitable enterprise, which Bennett founded and directs, is “Uniting humanity, one face at a time.”

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His advice to portrait artists is: “Be bold, be courageous. The big break for me came when I no longer believed it was hard to be an artist, and I believed it was possible. I then did everything to make it happen.”

#### WEBSITE AND REFERRALS YIELD THE MOST COMMISSIONS

Portrait artist Marvin Mattelson of Great Neck, New York, is also highly successful in this fine-art category, with a backlog of commissions. But unlike Bennett, Mattelson does not aggressively seek commissions.

Mattelson’s marketing methods have evolved over the years as he tried various means of attracting clients.

Describing his early marketing experiences at art and crafts fairs and portrait painters’ conferences, Mattelson said, “So much of the work I saw was of inferior quality. The photography [of sample portraits] was unclear, poorly staged and the color wasn’t right. The presentations were unprofessional.”

The arts and crafts fair circuit did not prove productive for Mattelson. “I had a 10-by-10 foot space, a portable table, business cards, a portfolio of paintings and a half-dozen paintings on display.

4 Stephen Bennett working on a Faces of the World portrait.

“That first year resulted in one commission. Ten other people said they were interested but nothing came of it.”

After a couple of years showing his work at arts and crafts fairs, Mattelson stopped participating. Based on some previous work of his and word-of-mouth recommendations, he received 10 commissions in one year.

“When the Internet came along, I realized it was a much more convenient way to showcase my work rather than schlep around a portfolio.”

Like Bennett, Mattelson said the portrait work itself is the most important of your marketing tools.

“There’s only one chance to make a first impression, as the saying goes,” he said. “So make sure the work you show is the very best you can do.”

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A number of his clients are millionaires and billionaires. “Many of them are art collectors and can appreciate outstanding work. And they can afford my prices.”

Most of Mattelson’s commissions come from either his website or by recommendations from previous clients, repeat business, or from new clients who have seen his work or who have been referred.

“My website and referrals each account for about 50 percent of my business. But most of the questions I get on my website are from other artists seeking advice or technical information.”

Prior to devoting an almost full-time schedule to his portrait work, he was a top illustrator for 30 years, creating covers for *Time* magazine, album covers and numerous ad campaigns for major enterprises including IBM, MTV and Lincoln-Mercury.

His advice to rookie portrait painters: “Be consistent in your work, with a consistently high level of quality. My own work has been the best advertising for what I do.”

### FACEBOOK PROMOS AND DRAWINGS FOR A FREE PORTRAIT

Jami Childers, an artist and gallery owner based in Jacksonville, Florida, doesn’t do much marketing to obtain portrait commissions, but what she does do is unique.

“I sent out a request on my Facebook page for photographs of



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sleeping babies,” Childers said, describing one of her first marketing initiatives.

“I received lots of replies and painted 24 small canvases from the photographs people sent. After painting the portraits, I sent the pictures back [to the senders]. People wanted to buy them, and I sold all but five of those portraits I painted.”

Another unique method of hers to attract portrait commissions is her portrait giveaway. Every so often, she holds a drawing for a free portrait. A name is drawn from the entries, and the winner gets a free portrait in a small format.

“This helps me compile an e-mail list of prospects and builds word-of-mouth,” Childers said.

Childers has a website and a blog, but she said they don’t bring in much business. Word-of-mouth recommendations bring in the most commissions.

### PETS AND HORSES ARE PORTRAIT SUBJECTS TOO

Many painters of pets and horses — two popular categories — also use their websites and social media as principal marketing tools.

5 Hart-Cohen Family (posthumous portrait of Arielle Hart) by Marvin Mattelson. Oil on linen, 49" x 70". Copyright © 2015 Marvin Mattelson. Used by permission of the artist.



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Scott Schiller of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, does graphite and colored pencil portraits of pets. Besides maintaining a website, he also posts his art on Facebook and receives inquiries about his work on Instagram. Schiller uses his Instagram page to post progress photos of sketches of whatever he's working on.

Schiller is an aggressive marketer of his portraiture, participating as a vendor at pet expos and visiting veterinarian hospitals, humane societies, pet supply shops and boarding kennels, where he drops off business cards and fliers advertising his work.

"They've all been very receptive at these places," Schiller said. "I received commissions this way."

At the pet expos, Schiller sets up a booth along with other vendors of pet supplies and services and hands out bags of doggie treats with a business card inside.

The most effective means of connecting with potential clients, Schiller said, is talking with them face to face. "People are passionate about their pets. They like to talk

about them. But it's also important for people to see my work live, not [reproduced] on a website or on Facebook."

Schiller, who also works as an art director for three magazines, has an affinity for animals, having worked as a zookeeper in Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee.

He also donates his work to fundraising events and raffles for charity, and on one occasion, he donated work to help pay for a prosthetic device for a dog who lost its leg. But this pro bono work also exposes his portrait art to a wide audience of potential clients.

**BOTTOM LINE:** As the evidence indicates, word-of-mouth recommendations generate the most commissions. Actual "live" portraits, rather than reproductions on the Internet are the best way to showcase an artist's work. But websites, social media, reaching out to prospects, and other proactive and inventive marketing methods will also generate business for the professional portrait artist. **PA**

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*Marc Davis is an award-winning painter, former art teacher, an independent journalist and the author of three critically acclaimed novels. Visit [marcdavis.net](http://marcdavis.net).*

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6 *Scarlet Starlet*, 2015, by Jami Childers. Mixed media, 24" x 30". Copyright © 2015 Jami Childers. Used by permission of the artist.  
 7 *Roxie* by Scott Schiller. Copyright © Scott Schiller. Used by permission of the artist.