



Saving Faces

Mark Gilbert's portrait painting encourages people to look beyond superficial facial disfigurement

It is amazing how a short news item can stay in your mind, something that really touches your emotions. Some months ago I switched on the television to see a piece on a very talented young artist who is working as artist-in-residence at St Bartholomew's and the Royal London Hospitals' Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Unit.

This gifted artist had been commissioned to create portraits of patients who were undergoing treatment for facial, mouth and jaw diseases such as cancer, trauma and deformity. Mark Gilbert's sensitive approach to his work, and the subjects he has painted, has resulted in a collection of some of the most stunning and paradoxically beautiful paintings that I have ever seen. These strong images seem to capture the life and soul of the subjects.

But one of the most compelling parts of the news coverage that I saw, was the obvious therapeutic effect that the portrait painting had on the patients, allowing them to see themselves in a

different way and to help build their self confidence and self-esteem.

So I was intrigued to see some recent coverage of these extraordinary portraits, on display at the National Portrait Gallery, to mark the launch of Saving Faces, an innovative art project and a new UK charity devoted to research into the prevention and treatment of oral and facial diseases and injuries. As well as the launch of a national touring exhibition of Mark Gilbert's extraordinary work.

Surgeon Iain Hutchison established the Saving Faces art project in collaboration with Mark Gilbert who is already a highly acclaimed portrait painter from Glasgow.

"Surgery of the face is challenging not only because of the intricacy of the surgery, but also because the surgery has a profound effect on the patient's psyche" said Iain Hutchison.

Gilbert's paintings and sketches represent more than the simple form and shape of

patients' faces. They also convey the changing emotions and character of patients during one of their most dramatic life events. Simple before-and-after photographs of surgery patients are one-dimensional; Gilbert's paintings illuminate the often conflicting range of emotions that patients experience - something that before-and-after photographs are unable to convey.

"Patients with facial deformity are usually shy and reclusive before surgery, says Hutchison, "The surgery transforms them emotionally, and, like a flower blossoming, their true character and psychological potential is released from the constraints of their facial appearance following treatment."

Psychologist Paul Farrand is studying patients' emotional response to their portraits. He will report on whether this is a useful therapy that should be introduced in all hospitals for patients with facial disorders.

Gilbert's work stands out in a number of ways. It demonstrates an outstanding quality of portraiture in people with distinctive faces and the range of possibilities provided by current facial surgery. It also shows that these patients are often powerful personalities who lead full and challenging lives, and encourages others to look beyond superficial facial disfigurement and it appears that being painted may in itself contribute to a patient's recovery.



photographs:
previous page - Henry de Lotbiniere with his portrait painted by Mark Gilbert; Henry talks with Alan Rickman; This page - the artist Mark Gilbert; 'Henry & Jerry' by Mark Gilbert



You will be able to see these unique portraits for yourself from September 15th, when the national touring exhibition starts in Nottingham and then moves onto Bath, Wales, Glasgow, back to the National Portrait Gallery in London, then to Leeds and Exeter.

Saving Faces aims to raise funds for research into the prevention and treatment of diseases and injuries that specifically affect the face and mouth. The charity endeavours to reduce the frequency of these conditions and improve their treatment.

Mouth cancer is the sixth most common cancer worldwide; there are nearly 4000 cases a year of mouth, lip, sinus and jaw cancer in England and Wales.

Saving Faces will also fund expeditions to third world countries that will provide equipment and training for medical and nursing staff to keep them abreast of current treatment methods.

Further information email: savingfaces@mail.com or telephone: 020 7485 5945 for details of the national touring exhibition gallery locations. ☺

