

Forward

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

William Shakespeare's "this" refers to his own sonnet because words do create a form of immortality. After fifty years as a professional portrait photographer, I believe that our craft, too—when done well—offers its own kind of permanence. For portraiture—the act of portraying people—is an art form whether in oils or in photographic dyes. My father, Maurice LaClaire, considered his talent for portraiture a calling, not a job. Following his lead, I have always gone behind the lens aspiring for something beyond a simple photograph.

Like my father before me, I have sought the perfection of one moment in my subject's life. Maurice LaClaire taught me how to block out what I might want to bring to the camera and instead open my eyes to what the people in front of the lens are showing me. What details—what characteristics—what identifying grace notes belong to them alone.



Maurice Carnes LaClaire, late 1930's

Thus this book is my way of thanking my father by honoring him and by explaining the art of portraiture. Maurice LaClaire is a recognized pioneer in color portraiture both for his technical creativity and for his artistic integrity. Color portraiture has been my life's passion as well.

Since most people reading this book have cameras and take their own pictures, I already share our readers' joy of photography. Despite the fact that the language of vision is not easily converted to the written word, my hope is that this book will help readers better understand—and I hope appreciate—the craft of portraiture.

This book is dedicated to my father who will always be a great Master of Portraiture. I hope the people you meet in the following portraits are as alive to you as they will always be to us.

...So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
David LaClaire



Image 417, 1997
15x21 (Lambda Digital Print by David LaClaire)

Introduction

Man's wish to "portray" life through art is as old as the Lascaux cave drawing of the wounded bison speared by a hunter painted 20,000 years before the birth of Christ. Painting the Egyptian pharaohs offered them immortality while drawing the Greek gods was a way to honor them and perhaps to control their capriciousness. Patrons have commissioned artists to paint family portraits from the days of the Roman Forum through the High Renaissance, and from the Victorian family gatherings into this century. Portraiture is a specialty that has often been presented as art because "artists" created it.

Thus the 20th Century portrait work my father Maurice LaClaire and I have done follows a human calling as ancient as man himself. Capturing a person's likeness on a cave wall, sarcophagus, canvas, or a sheet of film is a natural form of creativity. Never do these acts depicting human likenesses occur in isolation, but always in a larger context. Thus to understand portraiture, a little background about its evolution since the development of photography may be helpful. Learning something about both the historic context and the momentary engagement with an individual portrait can enrich the viewer's appreciation.

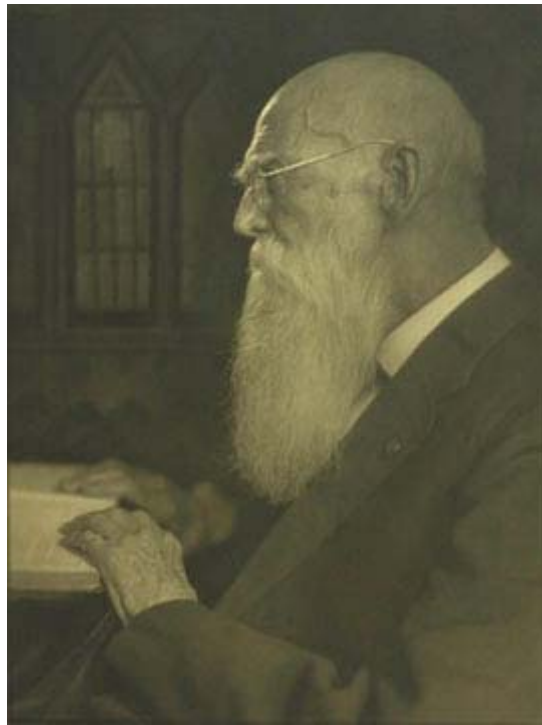


Image 019 – The Prayer, late 1920's

14x11 (Silver Gelatin Print by Maurice LaClaire)

The June 2001 issue of the Smithsonian magazine includes an article about an exhibition of Egyptian artifacts. One of them is a stunningly beautiful portrait of a young woman

done in colored beeswax on a wood cabinet door that dates back to 170 A.D. This woman with her penetrating gaze exemplifies the same human urge toward self-realization that we attempt to capture in our photographic images almost two thousand years later.

Many other illustrations, such as the sculpted Easter Island heads or the great Chinese warrior figures found near Xian, suggest the same fascination with the human image at different times and from different cultures. Portraits of religious subjects have long served as images of adoration, most familiarly the Madonna and Child. Often the patrons who commissioned artists to do complex religious scenes had themselves painted into the composition as an attempt to assure a kind of immortality for themselves.

Academically the portraiture of Rembrandt, Frans Hals, and other 17th Century portrait artists are studied as fine art. Indeed, the work of Jan Vermeer seems to anticipate the portrait photography that followed two centuries later. As a portrait photographer with a lens instead of a brush, I am intrigued by Vermeer's use of the camera obscura, which is a box with a hole, or aperture, at one end through which an image is formed on the opposite wall. It was the forerunner of the camera and Vermeer used it to achieve a more precise image of his subject. The study of proportion and perspective long pursued by the great artists in order to create a three-dimensional effect was accomplished by Vermeer's camera obscura.



Image 036 – Jimmy Allen, mid 1930's

14x11 (Silver Gelatin Print by Maurice LaClaire)

During the early 1800s, the camera obscura evolved into a true camera that produced the first photographs. While many people along the way were involved in achieving “an

image from nature,” credit by the French government for the first photograph goes to Nicephore Niepce in 1822. The better known Louis Daguerre and Niepce ultimately collaborated to promote the Daguerreotype.

Once Daguerre’s portrait photographs were seen, the demand for them was immediate. His early photographic portraits were miniatures showing the subject usually in a rigid pose. From that first beginning, “photographers” aspired to an artistry that would be accepted in the world as art. However, for me the question of the relationship of portraiture to art is less important than the question of whether portraiture reveals important qualities about the nature of man.

I believe that the content of portrait photography is capable of unique artistic achievement. My hope is that the readers of this book will see beyond words and recognize the images here as portraits, not just as “photographs.”

By the 1840s, Fox Talbot had developed the camera negative process called the Talbotype from which many copies of a photograph could be produced inexpensively. This two-step, negative-to-positive system also allowed the photographer to make enlarged prints that had the qualities of perspective long desired by the Renaissance artists. Such literal images produced photographically seemed to contribute to the great painters’ subsequent search for different ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Impressionism, abstract art, and cubism, for example, were possibly the artist’s reaction to the literal photographic image. In a dance to claim the title “art,” photographers, in turn, attempted to simulate these artistic movements photographically.

The works of Cezanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Impressionists were not unrelated to the photograph’s capacity of reflecting a very literal image from nature even though at the time color was not yet in the photographic portfolio. As the 19th century photographers influenced their contemporaries in the art world to find new perceptions, in turn, the Impressionists prodded photographers to see their subjects impressionistically. I contend that portraiture is still evolving and continues to be shaped by craftsmen of many technologies.

The question of whether a particular portrait qualifies as art is a judgment each person has to make. Every portrait involves three perspectives: the subject’s, the craftsman’s, and the viewer’s. What each of them brings to the portrait helps to address two important questions posed by David Rathburn, a faculty member at Grand Valley State University. “What is the nature of man?” and “Does the portrait image form an answer to that question?”



Image 234 – Mrs. Charles Bacon, 1976

40x30 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

The subject brings his face, body posture, and whatever effects his years of life have left on him. The portrait photographer brings: his knowledge of lighting and its affect on structure; his ability to select an environment appropriate for interpretation; his selection of lenses to achieve the best perspective; his mastery of whatever technology he chooses; and his observational skills regarding the subject's personality.

You, the viewer, bring your age, experience, and understanding as well as your observational skills to the portrait. To the extent that a portrait adds some understanding about the nature of man, it has validated itself and the question of "art or not" becomes irrelevant.

For Maurice LaClaire, color portraiture was art. His black-and-white work of the 1920s and 1930s illustrates the soft images that sometimes seem to mimic Impressionist art. His first portraits provide a good entry point into the LaClaire Tradition. The range of his early work foreshadows his singular commitment to the highest standard of color portraiture.

Maurice LaClaire's peers first recognized him for his color portrait photography in the late 1930s and 1940s. In the distinguished community of professional portrait photographers, Maurice LaClaire's work was named as the first to merge photographic portraiture with the history of portrait painting into a fine art.

The following note is from a program given by my father at a meeting of the Cameracraftsmen of America in Lake Delavon, Wisconsin. This group of forty professional photographers from various places in North America had been meeting annually since 1905.

“At 10 a.m., everyone gathered in one of the assigned program rooms to hear Maurice LaClaire of Grand Rapids, Michigan, present his program on natural color. Mr. LaClaire was a pioneer in the field of natural color, and considered to be the foremost expert in the United States. Everyone was excited to watch his actual demonstrations and to view his beautiful color portraits. For most, this was the first time they had any close contact with natural color photography. Mr. LaClaire’s program was over at noon and most did not want to leave, which indicated that they were very impressed with Mr. LaClaire.”

Welcome to a world of wonderful people as seen through the lens by my father and then by me. Welcome to the LaClaire Studio where my father taught me that only the best we could do was good enough. Welcome to the LaClaire legacy that carries on the human wish for self-depiction which is as old as the cave drawings.

1916-1919 - The First Exposure

In 1916 when Maurice LaClaire got an after-school job working for the Gurley Studio in his hometown of Big Rapids, Michigan, he had no idea it would lead to his calling. But once he was introduced to the basics of portrait photography, my father realized he'd found his passion and his destiny. After graduating from Big Rapids High School in 1919, he looked for the best education he could find in portrait photography.



Image 004 – Maurice LaClaire w/ clay bust

His search took him to Daddy Lively and his renowned Southern School of Photography in McMinnville, Tennessee. An academic and a successful portrait photographer, Daddy Lively made sure his students learned both the art and the craft of their chosen profession.

1940's – Setting High Standards

Dad always believed it was important to do one thing and do it well. Therefore, in 1948 he gave up his black-and-white business. It took time after this major decision to build a clientele who would support his color work.



Image 084 – Miss Phyllis McVoy, 1948

19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by Maurice LaClaire)

Maurice LaClaire declared his future with color when he developed his last monochromatic negative. While other professional portrait photographers still resisted color because it was an expensive and time-consuming process, LaClaire chose the path of Dye Transfer that would make him famous throughout his profession. From his one-man show at New York's Carl Zeiss Galleries in 1941 to his teaching the first class in color portraiture at the Winona School of Photography in 1947, Maurice LaClaire used the decade of the 1940s to establish himself as the country's leader in color

portraiture. Indeed, in 1946, the Kodak journal, *Studio Light*, referred to Maurice LaClaire as the “Grand Rapids Rembrandt.”

1950s - Crafting His Gift

“Trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle.”

Michelangelo

By the 1950s when I joined my father as an apprentice, he had gained national recognition. The Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. did something it had never done before by putting on an exhibition of one individual portrait photographer's work when it displayed 50 LaClaire portraits. His portraits also were shown in New York City with a display in Grand Central Station.

In 1952, the Grand Rapids Art Gallery put on a one-man show of LaClaire portraits. The next year Maurice LaClaire won the gold and bronze medallions at the International Photographic Exhibition in Leeds, England, for the best-of-show color portraits. Over the decade of the fifties, Maurice LaClaire was a sought-after and popular leader among portrait photographers. At the same time he had a growing and enthusiastic field of clients at home.



Image 114 – Mr. Vincent Price, 1959
19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by Maurice LaClaire)

Norman Rockwell and Henry Ford, Jr.



Image 094 – Mr. Norman Rockwell, 1952

19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by Maurice LaClaire)

In 1953, Dad and I drove to the Ford Rotunda in Dearborn, Michigan, to photograph Henry Ford II at the suggestion of the Ford Photographic division. It was Ford Motor Company's 50th anniversary. They had hired Norman Rockwell (above) to create visual images of the three Ford brothers. He always worked from photographs and had a particularly difficult time getting satisfactory photographs of the second Henry (below) and asked Ford Photographic if they knew a photographer who could make photographs from which he could work.

It became a memorable assignment. I remember little things, like Henry Ford's arriving through the entry that we had backed up to in order to unload our equipment from our Nash automobile. As he entered, he queried, "Who in hell owns that damn Nash?" Rockwell's immediate response was, "One of the workmen." Fortunately, Ford did not pursue it, but we thought it was interesting that he had observed his competitor's product at the door of the then-famous New Car Display Facility.



Image 095 – Mr. Henry Ford II, 1952

19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by Maurice LaClaire)

When we arrived, Rockwell met us with a large volume of painted portrait reproductions. He was not familiar with our work and brought the book to suggest how we might approach the problem. I brashly suggested that it might help him to view some of our work first—to which he agreed.

I placed a stack of 15x19 portraits in front of him. He gazed briefly at the top image, picked it up, and looked at the next. He then put the first one down, took the book from under his arm, and threw it sliding across the floor commenting, “Do whatever you like!”

I was most pleased that, in this way, he had acknowledged my father’s skill. It should be noted that Rockwell duplicated our portrait with only one change. He moved a small box on the surface of a table that crossed the background behind Ford to in front of him.

We later photographed both his brothers, Benson and William Clay, at the Detroit Club.

“Cat” Anderson

We photographed “Cat” Anderson (below) as part of a series for the York Musical Instrument Company. On the morning the session was scheduled, I picked Mr. Anderson up at the Pantlind Hotel and took him to breakfast at the hotel’s Cypress Cellar. He ordered a bowl of soup and a martini. He didn’t finish the soup!



Image 115 – Mr. “Cat” Anderson, 1958
19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

Sullivan

Thanks to Cecil Houghton, I had the opportunity to photograph Ed Sullivan (below) when Dad was on vacation. Celebrity is not a motivation, but I did enjoy Mr. Sullivan.



Image 131 – Mr. Ed Sullivan, 1955
29x24 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

Calder

Nancy Mulnix, who inspired Calder (top right) to create his La Grande Vitesse for Grand Rapids, insisted that I photograph the artist. He was not thrilled with the idea, but would do anything for Nancy. He was uncooperative until I used some profanity. In response, he showed a glint of humor, which I caught at just the right time!



Image 159 - Mr. Alexander Calder, 1969
24x20 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)



Image 354 – Dr. Louis Monger family, 1981

24x29 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

Monger

One of the near impossible problems in group portraiture is to create the impression that the subjects are unaware of the camera while at the same time controlling the technical quality. This portrait of my first wife's family on her parents' 50th wedding anniversary was an attempt to accomplish that. Dr. and Mrs. Louis M. Monger were wonderful in-laws, but to achieve that objective nearly drove us all crazy. They expected direction and were confused without it. Nevertheless, we achieved our goal, and they understood when the portrait was completed.

As Time Goes By

Throughout this book there are individuals and families shown time and again throughout the years. I have always found interesting the progression of a person or a family—even generations of a family. My most personal quest to capture the essence of an individual has been that of Dr. Duncan Littlefair (below).



Image 481 – Reverend Duncan Littlefair, 1947
19x15 (Dye Transfer Image by Maurice LaClaire)



Image 484 – Reverend Duncan Littlefair, 1968

19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

The portrait I made of him in the 1960s (above) was my first multiple image. I was trying to capture more than a single image would tell.

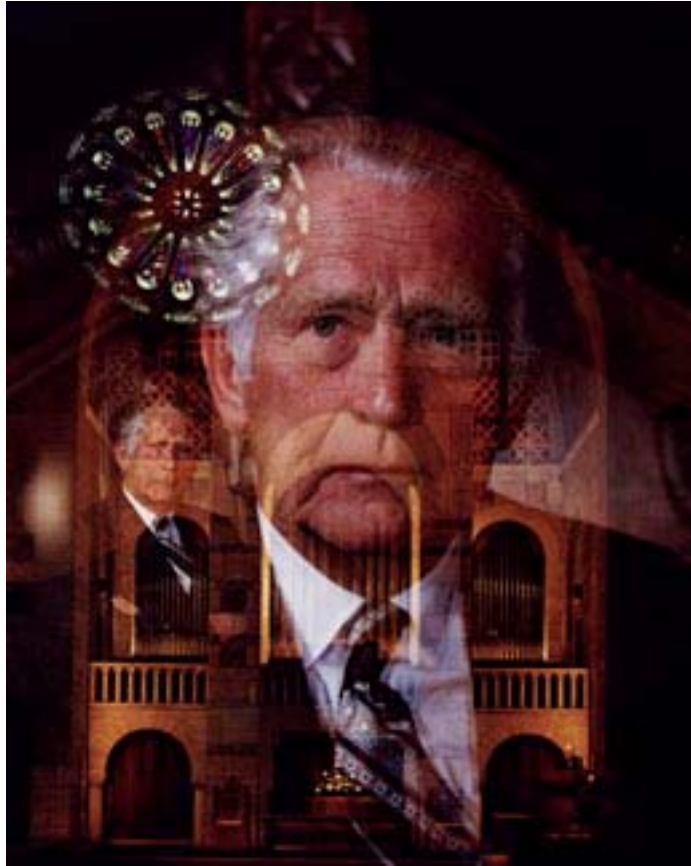


Image 483 – Reverend Duncan Littlefair, 1980
19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

The 1980s portrait (above) reflected his pervasive impact on the church.

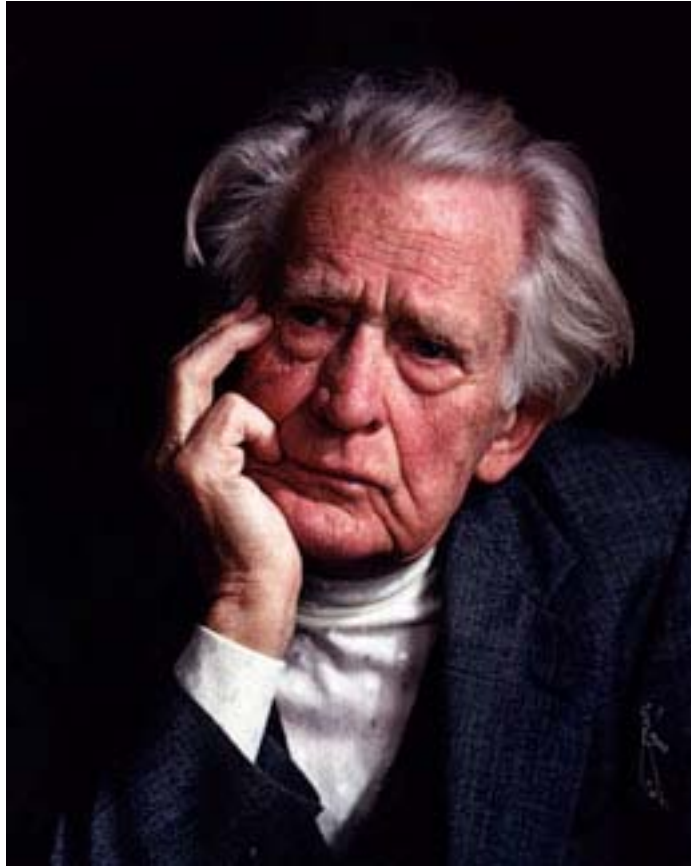


Image 484 – Reverend Duncan Littlefair, 1992

19x15 (Dye Transfer Print by David LaClaire)

The single face of Dr. Littlefair in the 1990s (above) may say more than the first three images. The most recent image was made in 2002 at home with his dog (next page). This image is probably the most personal of all.



Image 485 – Reverend Duncan Littlefair, 2002

19x15 (Lambda Digital Print by David LaClaire)

In today's society beauty and youth are everywhere. Women especially will go to great lengths to stay young. I have tried over the years to encourage our clients to be photographed later in life. People are much more interesting at 40 than 20, and at 60 or 80 than 40. Your face tells a story. Let that story be told.