

■ By Meredith E. Lewis

# Painting Portrait Commissions

Wende Caporale and John Ennis describe their own journeys into the business and share tips for getting started.

To hear portrait artists John Ennis and Wende Caporale tell their stories is to learn about artists who clearly are doing precisely what they're meant to be doing. Caporale, designated a master pastelist by the

Pastel Society of America, is a leader in the field of family portraiture and has shown her work in museums and exhibitions nationwide. Ennis is an acclaimed portrait artist with more than a dozen national awards for his work, including 11 from the Portrait Society of America.

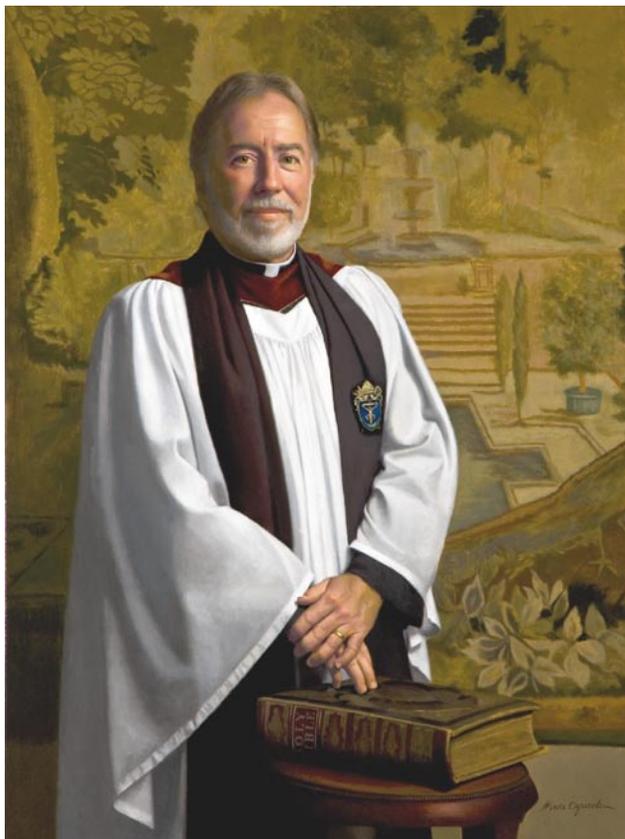
Each depicts his or her sitter in a distinctly personal style with a

confidence born of equal parts skill and experience. Their success seems so natural—so nearly inevitable—that it's easy to overlook the fact that it has taken both artists an extraordinary amount of work to get to where they are today.

## Circuitous paths to success

As with many of their peers, their career journeys were long and winding. While Ennis began his career as an illustrator, Caporale initially chose a “practical” path in business. Unfortunately, relegating her practice of art to nighttime classes left Caporale feeling frustrated that she had so little time to develop her talent. It was not until a serious car accident, however, that she reevaluated her priorities and

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Reverend Phil Tierney (above; oil, 40x30) by Wende Caporale and M (at right; oil, 42x26) by John Ennis



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decided to study art full time.

“Once the decision was made,” Caporale says, “I was so determined that things began to fall into place.” She ultimately received a bachelor’s degree in fine arts illustration and also worked as a freelance illustrator for 12 years before turning her attention to portraiture full time.

### Gritty determination

Caporale’s early business training gave her an edge as she was building her career as an artist. “Being an independent contractor, as most working artists tend to be, we have to be conscious of the cash flow,” she remarks. “When working for someone else, you can depend on regular paychecks and maybe even health insurance.”

Being self-employed has its own benefits, such as writing off expenses connected with one’s business, but Caporale cautions, “It also involves being scrupulous about accounting and being prepared for the lean times. After many years in business, I’ve discovered the phrase ‘feast or famine’ could not be more apt. I’ve learned ways to navigate through and even benefit from these types of circumstances and always

feel that it’s just a matter of time before the phone will ring with a new opportunity.”

### Organization, the key

There is, perhaps, no other artistic profession that more poignantly illustrates the artist’s dilemma than portrait painting. It allows artists the chance to render a likeness in one’s own signature style for a paying audience, a seemingly perfect mix of opportunities. The more successful an artist is with commission work, however, the more commissions he or she receives, and the less time is left for other types of art.

“Balance is the struggle,” remarks Ennis. “It’s hard to get to my gallery work when there’s always a long list of commissioned work to be done.” Staying organized, he says, is the key. “I often have many projects going on at one time, involving clients, subjects, agents, galleries and travel—and staying organized has been a big challenge.”

### Agency and gallery routes

Getting started is the major concern of the emerging portrait artist (see Four Tips for Getting Started, page ●●). As Ennis remembers, this can

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*Cornelia Kelley* (below; oil, 54x34) by John Ennis and  
*Margaret* (at right; pastel, 24x18) by Wende Caporale



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## About the artists

John Ennis, his artist wife, Jo-Ann, and their two boys live in Yardley, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. To learn more about his work and workshops, go to [www.john-ennis.com](http://www.john-ennis.com).

Wende Caporale lives with her husband, artist Daniel E. Greene, and their daughter Avignon in North Salem, New York. See her website, [www.wendecaporale.com](http://www.wendecaporale.com), for more information on her art and workshops.

take some doing. After placing several failed advertisements in local magazines and realizing that there was little market for commissioned work in his native Bucks County, Pennsylvania, he went to a national conference of the Portrait Society of America, where he found himself surrounded by people with similar interests.

He was approached by an agency with which he signed, and the commissions started pouring in. Now when people employ Ennis to do a portrait, they've already gone through a vetting process and are not only familiar with his style but have chosen him for it. Ultimately, this allows the artist more creative control over the painting.

Caporale is represented by a number of portrait galleries that help

their artists generate commissions. Before she became connected with the galleries, she approached people whose children she believed might make good subjects and asked if she could paint them. "Inevitably, I later sold many of these to the parents and built a reputation by word of mouth," she recalls. "Every so often, I've had the good fortune to have my work reproduced in newspapers, which has yielded a lot of attention and subsequent commissions."

Whether you're a well-seasoned portrait artist or are just beginning your career, continued success demands dedication and a lot of hard work. Nevertheless, resources abound to help artists of all skill levels; seeking them out is well worth the effort.

## Four tips for getting started

Though launching into professional portrait painting can be a daunting task, fortunately there are a host of excellent informational sources for portrait painters from beginner to expert levels.

### 1 Advance your skills with workshops

A simple Google search can yield dozens of listings for courses across the country. “Taking workshops with professional portrait painters helps advance an artist’s skill,” says John Ennis, “bringing him or her together with like-minded artists and offering an opportunity to seek advice directly from a professional.”

Finding a good workshop, however, is very important. The Portrait Society of America, a not-for-profit organization, has a useful website ([www.portraitsociety.org](http://www.portraitsociety.org)) that includes information on portrait academies, where attendees can observe and even paint with nationally known artists. “Dedicated,” the website reads, “to fostering and enhancing the practice, aesthetics and applications of traditional, fine art portraiture,” the society is open to all individuals with an interest in portrait art. Ennis suggests participating in the society’s annual conference and submitting work to its annual competition, which, he says, can help you learn about the business, meet other working professionals and build recognition for your painting.

### 2 Seek agency representation

Getting formal representation for your work, on the other hand, can be a little tricky. “Agencies are constantly flooded with queries from prospective artists looking for representation,” Ennis cautions, “so getting in with one of them is an accomplishment in itself.”

Ennis, who notes his own agency experience has been entirely positive, suggests finding out an agency’s submission policy and strictly adhering to the guidelines. “It’s up to the individual artist to set his or her own prices,” he says. “Getting pricing right is important. Agencies don’t necessarily require exclusivity but will insist that an artist’s prices be consistent. The agency will show the work to prospective clients, take a commission on a sale, help arrange travel (usually paid by the client), and offer guidance along the way.”

“To fill their rosters, portrait agencies select artists who run the gamut in terms of styles and prices,” Wende

Caporale adds. “In my experience, an agency won’t consider an artist who doesn’t have experience in portraiture, since it requires such specific skills.”

### 3 Connect with a gallery

“A gallery will market artists using the examples of previous work and the sample the artist has provided, which is displayed in the gallery,” explains Caporale. “The rate varies, but most portrait galleries take a 40-percent commission, and some will share a portion of the deposit with the artist.”

“Becoming affiliated with a gallery can be challenging, since the competition is great, but persistence is beneficial,” Caporale continues. “Some of the benefits of being connected with a good gallery are credibility, national exposure, and having an advocate when dealing with clients. Galleries also tend to keep their artists quite busy, which can be a double-edged sword.”

Caporale adds that a standard portrait commission contract includes not only the name and contact information of the client and sitter, but the size, medium and price of the finished work. “Sometimes a brief outline of the process of the artist is included,” she says, “so there are no surprises. Deadlines are indicated, as well as a satisfaction clause, so clients can be assured that they will be paying for a portrait they can accept.”

### 4 Try an online portfolio

If gallery representation isn’t feasible or desired, an online portfolio is another way to gain exposure. Many leading contemporary portrait artists, including Ennis, are featured on the online gallery A Stroke of Genius Inc. ([www.portraitartist.com](http://www.portraitartist.com)), which features works by traditional portrait painters and sculptors. Visitors can browse the site to peruse online portfolios, find links to artists’ websites, commission a portrait artist, find a workshop or visit a virtual bookstore. The Resource & Biz Center link on the site is particularly useful to working portrait artists, offering a list of portrait agencies; art schools and ateliers; legal advisors; framers and other art-related businesses; and an extensive list of marketing resources. The site will also create a Web-based portfolio for a fee. 



McCuen (oil, 32x24) by John Ennis

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