

An Artist's *Artist*

Remembering the life and legacy of portrait
artist Everett Raymond Kinstler.

BY MICHAEL SHANE NEAL



Everett Raymond Kinstler in his Connecticut studio.

On May 26, beloved portrait painter Everett Raymond Kinstler passed away peacefully in Bridgeport, Connecticut, surrounded by family and friends. While the Portrait Society of America and artist community mourns the loss of such an influential figure, we also celebrate his extraordinary legacy of art and dedicated service to the art world. Kinstler attended high school in Manhattan at the School of Industrial Art before dropping out in 1942 to take a full-time job at a comic book publishing house. After serving in the Army at the end of World War II, Kinstler returned to New York, eventually establishing himself as a renowned and prolific portrait painter. Over his long career, Kinstler has received many honors and awards including the Copley Medal awarded by the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and the Portraits, Inc. Lifetime Achievement Award. The National Portrait Gallery in Washington has 84 of Kinstler's works in its collection, and his work is also part of the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. In his honor, fellow artist Michael Shane Neal wrote this touching tribute to his longtime mentor and friend.

I stepped out of the cab in front of the National Arts Club in New York, just as I had a hundred times before. There stood the venerable old building, the home of the club for more than a century, towering over the gated and beautiful Gramercy Park—a small piece of relative tranquility carved out of a restless city just beyond its borders. Although it may have looked familiar to me, and countless

others, it would never be quite the same again.

Everett Raymond Kinstler, the club's most famous resident, was no longer there. He had passed away peacefully in a Bridgeport hospital 10 days before at the age of 92. For over 70 years, the remarkably talented and charismatic artist had lived and worked in the same building. No other artist or member had ever been there longer, and

Ronald Reagan, oil, 30 x 24" (76 x 61 cm)

Katharine Hepburn, oil, 28 x 22" (71 x 53 cm)



no other had left a more indelible mark on the beloved institution or on the world of portrait and figurative art in America.

Dropping out of school at the age of 16, his father once said to him, “You’re a lucky young man. You’re going to be able to earn your living doing something you enjoy. Don’t ever forget it.” And, Kinstler never did. In the 1940s and 1950s, he spent countless hours at his drafting table inking thousands of pages for comic books like Doc Savage, Hawkman, The Shadow and Zorro, pulp magazines, book covers and generally “cutting his teeth” as a young artist. Kinstler would often quip that during this period of his career he was best known for “cowboys and cleavage.” As television became the new entertainment and photography took the place of illustrators in the mid-20th century, Kinstler turned to portrait and figure painting. He connected to other artists in his building and in the city, who made their careers interpreting the portrait and figure—masters such as Frank DuMond, James Montgomery Flagg, John Johansen, Gordon Stevenson and Paul Manship. All had known or studied with John Singer Sargent, Kinstler’s hero, and they saw in the young Kinstler something special and generously showered him with their knowledge and affection.

I slowly walked down the long, seemingly endless back corridor of the Arts Club to the studio annex in the rear of the building. As

I walked, I reflected on the last few weeks. Earlier in the month, he’d been hard at work in his studio with several portraits on the easels, putting the finishing touches on them before their deliveries. I had visited him in the hospital only 36 hours before his passing. He was himself, talking for several hours about art, his current projects and reflecting on his determination to keep working even though he’d not felt well for some time. At one point he even discussed the difference between being “incorporated” and a “sole proprietorship,” all the while injecting whenever possible his clever wit. His body was having issues, but his mind was not. “Nature is taking command,” he said as he faced the challenges of advanced age and mortality.

I finally reached the elevator and took it to the 10th floor. The same elevator that carried countless politicians, U.S. presidents, celebrities and men and women from all walks of life to visit the studio and meet their portraitist. He enjoyed them all, and they in turn enjoyed him. Actors and entertainers like John Wayne, Katharine Hepburn, James Cagney, Christopher Plummer and Tony Bennett; U.S. presidents like Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford—he painted eight in all; and over 50 government officials, hundreds of CEOs, philanthropists, astronauts, college presidents and the like. Kinstler’s fresh, direct and colorful style appealed to modern tastes in portraiture. Often catching his sitters “in their best light,” his



Scott Carpenter, oil, 50 x 54" (127 x 114 cm)



Portrait of Tom Wolfe, oil, 50 x 27" (127 x 69 cm)



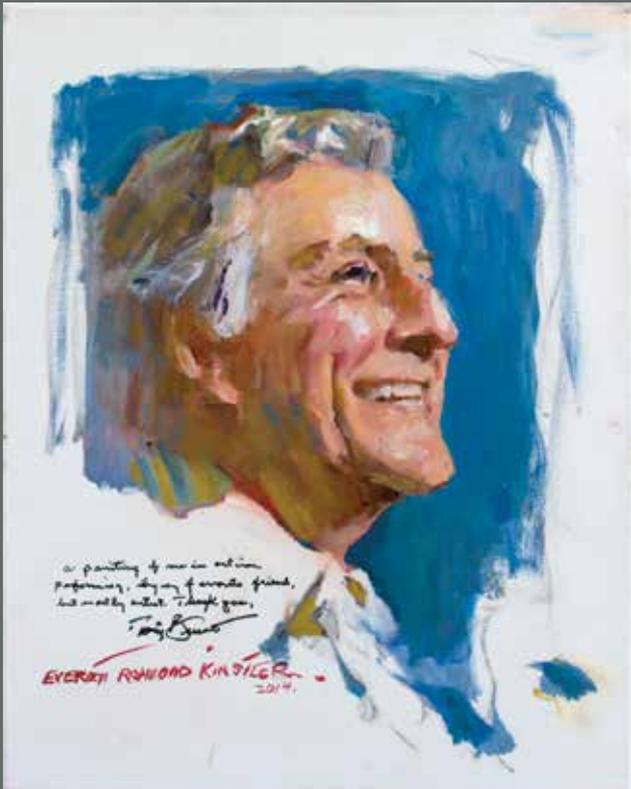
Preparatory life sketches of astronaut Scott Carpenter, the second man to orbit Earth.

ability to capture not only the outer likeness but the character and personality of his subjects led to his success. He completed more than 2,500 commissions in his long career. Often managing dozens of high-profile clients at once, he sometimes referred to himself as a "professional head-hunter." Kinstler's energy and focus made him as prolific as any artist who ever wielded a brush.

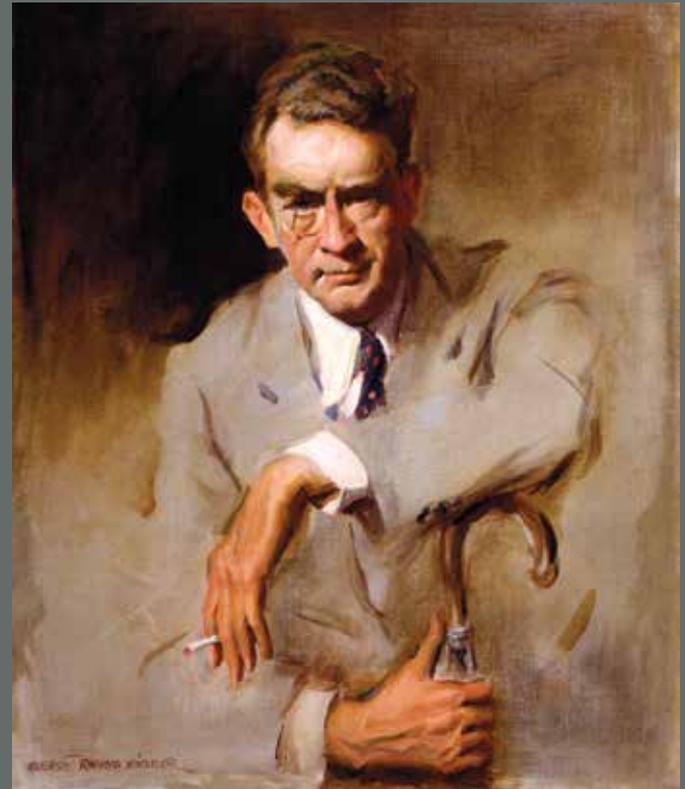
As the elevator door opened, I stepped out into the foyer to face two doors. The door on the left was to the studio; the door on the right was

to the studio apartment. I rang the bell of the apartment, and Peggy Kinstler answered. She'd arranged to meet me there to have one last look around a place so very special to so many. My first visit there had been 25 years before, and little had changed about the space. Furniture occupied the same arrangement for decades—houseplants in most every corner, art on the walls and photographs everywhere. Peggy led me into the studio and left me for a moment to take it all in.

Everything was just as he left it, bathed in the glorious, almost



The Entertainer, oil on canvas, 24 x 20" (61 x 51 cm)



James Montgomery Flagg, oil on canvas, 31 x 25½" (79 x 65 cm)

magical light of his giant north windows—a taboret full of tubes of paint, a palette not quite cleaned with pools of paint around its edge, dozens of brushes in old coffee cans, rags and paper towels in the waste basket, a variety of finished and unfinished canvases stacked against the wall, and the faint smell of varnish in the air. The studio was tidy in its own way, with almost everything full of a rich patina from years of use. Near the window sat James Montgomery Flagg’s model stand and on it an empty chair awaiting the artist’s “next victim” as he loved to put it. At the center of the room was a tall swivel chair with his easel positioned just in front of it. I sat down and looked around. I turned to the easel and stared. It was at that moment I realized it was empty. For the first time it really hit me that a remarkably successful career was complete and the artist, my dear friend, was gone.

I am one of many students who Kinstler—“Ev” as I called him—spent endless hours with as he generously shared the knowledge he had amassed over his long and productive life. He loved to teach and was a passionate advocate for traditional painting and drawing techniques. He began formally teaching in 1970 at the Art Students League and continued teaching workshops and writing books on portrait and figure painting for more than 40 years. A firm believer in the power of community, in 1998 Kinstler threw his support behind the newly formed Portrait Society of America. From the beginning, he showed unwavering support for its mission. He attended 20 consecutive annual conferences, often demonstrating, lecturing or judging the *International Portrait Competition*.

As an artist’s artist, the quality of his talent and craftsmanship

is lauded by many, but the quality of his character is unanimously praised. No artist in recent memory has been more generous, caring, or committed to his fellow artists than Kinstler. His passion for art, insatiable appetite for knowledge, clever wit, love for people, engaging stories and irresistible charm are legendary.

As I left the studio for the last time, I thought of how Ev never liked to say goodbye. In hundreds of phone calls and encounters, not once—not once—did he ever say goodbye. He simply didn’t use those words—ever. The last day I saw him in the hospital, I looked back as I left the room, and he was looking back at me. He lifted his hand and gave me a thumb’s up. I returned the gesture as I walked away. [la](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since beginning a full-time career as an artist at the age of 21, Michael Shane Neal has completed more than 600 portraits on display around the country. Receiving a BA at Lipscomb University, Neal has also studied at the Santa Fe Institute of Fine Arts, Scottsdale Artists’ School, the Lyme Academy of Art and is a protégé of celebrated figurative and portrait painter Everett Raymond Kinstler. Neal’s work has been featured in both *American Art Collector* and *International Artist* magazine, as well as numerous other publications, and he is a member of the board of directors of the Portrait Society of America.