

**Claire Elizabeth Jackson** is a portrait artist who trained at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford and now lives in Leicester. She usually works in oil, but sometimes uses pastel, charcoal or graphite. Her work has been exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and one of her recent projects has been to paint a series of portraits that celebrate the diversity of faiths and cultures in Leicester. These were exhibited at the New Walk Gallery and Museum in Leicester.

We've been friends for a couple of years and I'm grateful and delighted that she has agreed to help me with my art treat; to overcome my lack of artistic confidence and produce a piece of art that I'm happy to frame and hang on the wall. She's entertaining company too, so I'm really looking forward to spending time with her.



### **How did you get the idea for your multi-faith project?**

I grew up in London but ever since coming to live in Leicester I've felt comfortable as I like the diverse faith community. Leicester manages to have excellent interfaith relations and I'm interested in this and wanted to celebrate it. I wanted to have an exhibition and thought 'what a lovely theme. All the faiths of Leicester together in an art gallery. They all live well together and this could be a celebration when they come together, like a party, not for a religious occasion'. All the people I painted came to the opening of my exhibition and it was great to see them all together in one room. And another reason is that I love it when people are dressed up... I love bright costumes and the coloured turbans that Sikhs wear, for example.



### **Who did you paint for your multi-faith project?**

I looked around for people who wouldn't mind being painted and who wouldn't mind sitting still. Some didn't fancy it. I tried community leaders but some Islamic ones thought that members of their community might find it unacceptable. They like geometric and architectural pictures, but not images of people. But I did paint several Muslims from different traditions and backgrounds. Then there were both Progressive and Orthodox Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, a Bahá'í and a Druid. And I did a Buddhist nun, a Baptist, a Church of England bishop, and a Quaker. I was unable to find a nun to sit for me. I drew a monk but he wouldn't sit still and this is a problem for a portrait painter. Some people can't sit still you know. Like my husband!

The one I felt was most successful was the former kindertransportee, Ben Abeles. I took my time with him and did it really carefully. I've had very favourable comments about that one. He's special. He was sent to England with nothing and his parents and sister and her husband were killed in Auschwitz. He's the busiest person I've ever met. He was an award-winning scientist and worked on the Challenger spacecraft. He speaks German, Polish, Hebrew, English and Spanish and does a lot of charitable work including working for peace in the Middle East. Wherever he goes he helps people. It was only when he got to his eighties that he had time fully to grieve and reflect on the family he had lost. But he still knows how to enjoy life and we've become friends.



### **How long did it take to do each of these portraits?**

Some had a number of sittings over a couple of months. Others I did in a day if the person was relaxed and kept still. With these, I took photos of the clothes and painted them in later. Generally, I need a day to get to know the person. Their faces and their hands. People often say that hands are a test of how good a portrait is. I always want to keep working at my portraits to make them better.

### **How do people react to being painted?**

Most people love being looked at. Some keep talking but I have to tell them to stop. When people keep talking the pictures are less good. They distract me. I have to say "I need you to be quiet so I can do your mouth", or whatever. And some crane their neck so they can see the picture. That's no good either.

### **And how do people react to their portraits when they're finished?**

Some people love them and can't wait to get them home. I did over thirty in the multi-faith series. But there was one person for whom art was not part of her life and I still have her painting. She didn't take it. Then there was another person who really didn't like their portrait. The picture of himself was not like the person he thought he was. That's fair enough. But I didn't want to keep it so I painted over it. When people sit for me then they see the painting progressing. I have to tell them that it goes through a lot of states before it's finished.

### **How do you compose your portraits?**

Composition is the bit I find hardest about doing a portrait. I always put a few relevant artefacts in. But on the whole, I'm more interested in the person. That's the bit I like. I often look at other people's paintings to get inspiration for composition.



### **Are some people harder than others to capture?**

It can be hard to capture young people. An old person is full of history on their face. A pretty young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes is not so easy to paint.

### **Have unexpected things happened when you've been painting?**

There have been times when I've become enchanted by people. They might have beautiful hands or legs, for example. Sometimes it's crept out of my mouth and I've said "you've got lovely skin" or something. I don't feel that's very professional. Sometimes people cry. It's like you are giving them permission to relax and be themselves. I just brush it aside. It's one of those things. They settle into it eventually. People like the stillness. Early on I had a couple of men who asked to be painted. They'd ask for the appointment and then they'd say "by the way, I'm not going to be wearing any clothes". So I said "no". If a woman asks to be painted in the nude that's fine. Though I would probably have someone else painting there too. I love the human form but I don't want to see some man getting turned on.

### **How has your painting changed over the years?**

I realised after a while that I'd been looking down at people's eyes when I was painting them. Sometimes that works but it's not always successful. Now I have a grand professional platform that raises them up. I had a small one for a while but sometimes they would move their chair back and I would think they were going to fall off. It was a worry!



### **Which portraits stick in your mind most?**

I remember one man who was very touching. He responded to my advert shortly after I left art school and brought his wife to be painted. It was clear that he thought she was very beautiful. He loved her so much that he wanted to capture it. She was all dressed up in a white dress covered in a big cabbage rose pattern and with a lovely nipped-in waist. It was obviously his favourite dress.

Another favourite portrait is one that hangs on my landing. It's of my twin sister in her wheelchair. She had multiple sclerosis and died some years ago. I knew when I was painting it that it would be special. It's the one thing I would rush to take out if there was a fire in my house. She was a terrible fidget when I was painting her which meant that I got her face from various angles. This picture is like the portrait of Dorian Gray for me. She stayed young while I've grown older.

### **What do you love about your work?**

I love the meditative quality. It's a bit like yoga. It demands a very high level of concentration and focus. I get transported when I'm painting. I also love squirting the squidgy paint about and working with it. It gets all over the place. It goes all over the house. Somehow it even got onto my new cashmere jumper. It's a phenomenon. I find it difficult to keep things for best as they get covered in paint. Curtains, doorknobs...they all get it. Rick, my husband has to follow me round with special chemicals. He gets most of it off but it's still there if you look closely.

### **What do you find frustrating about your work?**

I'm always in a hurry. I would like more time to do my painting.

### **How did you become an artist?**

I have to think... well, my sister and I used to love drawing even when we were very little. We used to draw all the time. Then when I was at school, I was advised by my careers adviser that I should become an occupational therapist because I was "good with my hands". So I went and did this but after a year I knew it wasn't right for me, so I left and went art school. After this I tried to be a

portrait painter but I lacked confidence and didn't have the right networks. So I drifted into office work instead and this paid the mortgage.

### **And how did you get into teaching art?**

When I was doing the office work, my husband said that I would make a good art teacher. I said "I can't teach!" I was an undiagnosed dyspraxic and did quite badly at school. But he said "you'd be very good at it", so I enrolled in a class to learn about teaching art. It changed my life. I qualified during the Thatcher years when there was no money to employ new art teachers, but there was a lot of TVEI funding (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative). This was what people were talking about, so I ended up teaching business and enterprise with just a little art teaching, too. It was crazy really. I taught business for twenty-seven years in a school but I managed to get art in wherever I could. I'd explain businessy ideas with pictures on the board and I got the kids to draw pictures to help them understand and remember. Visual aids were always there in my teaching. Since I left full-time teaching I've been teaching Judaism through art at infant and junior schools.

### **What kind of painting inspires you?**

I love paintings that are full of beautiful colours and daubs...Harold Gilman... Matisse... Vuillard. I particularly like daubs but also confident brushwork like Daumier and Manet. I'm very fond too of Monet's 'Women in the Garden'. I suppose if I had to choose one favourite painting, one that I would steal if I could, then it would have to be any of the paintings or sketches from Daumier's series on print collectors. The Print Collectors, for example, shows two art collectors looking through a portfolio of prints. I love the vigorous lines. [www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/442](http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/442)

### **Is there any kind of art that you really dislike?**

I don't like art that's done with a palette knife. I think it's ugly. Also I don't like art where the artist can't explain their work, or talk about it. I'm wary of charlatans. Picasso and Matisse, for example. They could talk and explain their work. I trust them. You have to be able to trust the artist.

### **And lastly, who would you most like to paint?**

Well I did ask David Attenborough once. But he wrote back very nicely and asked 'why would you want to paint me?' But now I would choose the author, Howard Jacobson. His face is full of crags and lumps. It's a messy face and that's the best kind of all. I would paint him using masses of daubs. He would be very good daub material.

**You can find out more about Claire on her website [www.claireelizabethjacksonportraits.co.uk](http://www.claireelizabethjacksonportraits.co.uk)**