



A PORTRAIT INSTITUTE REPORT

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1979-1993

The Artists' Conference That Fundamentally Transformed Art Teaching in America

Written by Christian A. Pennington



**Elizabeth and
John Howard Sanden**
Creators of The National
Portrait Seminar (1979)

In the summer of 1979, two young New York artists rented an off-Broadway theatre and presented a five-day seminar that would transform forever the possibilities for the teaching of art. The success of the venture astounded the creators as much as it amazed the New York art establishment. 300 artists participated, coming from 39 states and such far-away places as Brazil, Lebanon, The Netherlands and New Zealand. In 1979, closed-circuit video, with the possibility of projecting the program onto large jumbo-tron screens, had not yet been perfected. The personal computer was still only an idea. The Internet had not even been imagined. But the desire of artists to mingle and seek improvement of their skills was as old as humanity itself, and as firmly established.

The Seminar was the brainchild of John Howard Sanden and his wife Elizabeth, both New York-based portrait artists and teachers. Sharing the leadership of the conference with the Sandens were the nationally-recognized painters Robert Bruce Williams of Washington, D.C., Gordon Wetmore of Chattanooga, and Margaret Holland Sargent of Los Angeles. Mrs. Sargent had agreed to be a last-minute substitute for Patricia Hill Burnett of Detroit, whose husband died, after an illness, on the eve of the Seminar's opening. Lee Lively of Virginia Beach, a talented artist with extensive experience as a stage actor, volunteered to serve as Master of Ceremonies.

The week unfolded through a crowded schedule of painting demonstrations, lectures, panel discussions and special-topic seminars. An atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm for the profession of portraiture permeated all the proceedings and gave the week a special quality of inspiration and invigoration.

A BREAK WITH TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHODS

The Seminar constituted a deliberate departure from traditional formats for teaching art technique. For hundreds of years, painting classes have been based on the concept of a cluster of easels surrounding the live model on a posing platform. The photograph on this page, of a nineteenth-century class at the Art Students League of New York, illustrates this concept. The problem with this format is that the number of participants is necessarily limited. Anyone who has directed the setup and conduct of such a class knows that there is a finite number of easels that may be placed to advantage around a live portrait model, whose head (the object of study) is a mere ten inches in size. The ideal number of easels is ten or twelve. Yes, there are painting classes in which perhaps as many as twenty easels are clustered around the subject, but more than this places the outliers at a considerable disadvantage.

The Old



Traditional portrait teaching involved a cluster of easels, grouped around the model.

The New



Hundreds of art students, seated theatre-style for professional lecture-demonstrations.

For hundreds of years, tradition dictated that portraiture was taught as a small group of artists, standing at their easels, competed for limited space and a distant view of the sitter. Here (left), artists at the Art Students League of New York, in a nineteenth-century photo, adhere to this formula. The National Portrait Seminar sought to change the format in which portraiture was taught.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM BILLY GRAHAM

John Sanden had come to his present role from a nine-year experience as art director for the Reverend Billy Graham, at his world headquarters in Minnesota. Everything in the Billy Graham outreach is predicated on assembling the largest possible audience for the hearing of the message. Why could not this same approach be brought to the world of art teaching? Why could not the circle of a dozen artists at their easels be replaced by a theatre-full of artists, numbering into hundreds, for the teaching of the same information?

Ten years later than 1979, and the answer would have been easy. But in 1979, the now-commonplace practice of photographing the proceedings for live display on a giant screen, had not yet been perfected. If 300 artists were to be assembled to view a painting demonstration, the head of the sitter would be still just ten inches high, as would be the painting on which the artist was working. A seminar participant, in a crowd of 300 and seated in the fiftieth row from the stage, would be unable to fully appreciate the demonstration. This one fact — the absence of large-screen projection — was a cautionary, limiting reality in the seminar planning of 1979.

Nevertheless, the lure of teaching to a class of 300, rather than one of twelve, was irresistible. The Sandens resolved to make the attempt. Another factor, now taken totally for granted, was the absence, in 1979, of the personal computer. Today's "email blast" and online registration had not even been thought of. Advertising was by print media — the Sandens early settled on *American Artist* magazine, exclusively — and registration was entirely by mail.

It was decided to hold the seminar in New York City. New York in 1979 was suffering from an image problem. Yes, of course, New York was the art capital of the world, and the lure of the great metropolis was, in many ways, pure magic. But the streets of New York were considered dangerous, and people from Iowa and Alabama thought twice about planning a week in Manhattan. The city was then, as now, more expensive to visit than any other American city.

THE PORTRAIT CLUB OF NEW YORK

John Howard Sanden had been teaching portrait painting at the Art Students League of New York since 1970. In 1974, with his wife Elizabeth (whom he had met in the League class), he established a painting class in a private studio. Utilizing a spacious and modern suite in a midtown Manhattan office building, the Sandens made every attempt to create the ideal painting environment. "The Portrait Club of New York" offered modern fluorescent lighting, convenient wheeled taboret-easel combinations, spotless surroundings — even air-conditioning — all were employed to transform (it was hoped) the learning experience. The class sizes were strictly limited to optimize the participants' sight-lines and their capacity to view the subtle transitions.

In addition to the painting studio, The Portrait Club offered a modest lecture hall, capable of seating a group of fifty. To augment the schedule of painting classes, the Club announced a series of weekend seminars. While subjects such as color-mixing and portrait drawing produced expected responses, the announcement of seminars devoted to professional portrait practice ("How to Attract Clients" and "Working With an Agent", etc.) instantly drew sell-out registrations. If all fifty seats could be filled quickly with such an offering, why not try for a much larger response — say, several hundred artists — perhaps in a theatre setting.

THE BARBIZON PLAZA THEATRE

New York of course offers every size and type of theatre accommodations. As luck would have it, at the foot of the block in which the Sandens lived, was the perfect theatre for what was taking shape in their imaginations. In the 1950's, the Barbizon Plaza Hotel, on fashionable Central Park South at the corner with Avenue

of the Americas, had commissioned the foremost Broadway stage designer of the era, Jo Meilziner, to create a small (500 seats) theatre, fully adequate for professional productions, and located just off the hotel's main lobby. The theatre featured comfortable seating for 500 (including a small balcony), a handsome stage, complete audio-visual equipment (state-of-the-art for that era), as well as comfortable backstage dressing rooms. It was perfect. The Sandens booked the Barbizon Plaza Theatre for the third week in June, 1979, and reserved a block of two hundred rooms.

A DARING AND AUDACIOUS MOVE

For John and Elizabeth Sanden, it was a daring and audacious move. As far as could be determined, no one had ever attempted such an undertaking. Papers had to be signed, and commitments made. It was a daring roll of the dice. Failure, or even partial success, would be both professionally and financially disastrous. There were no deep-pocketed investors standing in the wings. It was all-or-nothing for the young artists.

Ads began running in *American Artist* (full-page ads, of course). The Sandens had formed one very noteworthy alliance. The artist Gordon Wetmore of Chattanooga, whom they met through the Art Students League class, had attempted a somewhat similar teaching format (though on a much smaller scale) in a hotel in Atlanta the previous year. Wetmore's small one-inch ad in *American Artist* had caught the Sandens' attention. The ad contained the word "seminar". Wetmore's Atlanta venture had proved successful, and he had later joined with the Sandens in several of the Portrait Club weekend presentations in New York.

Though slow at first, the registrations for the June conference began to accelerate, and became a flood. It became clear that the capacity of the theatre might be tested. One reality of the seminar business was learned early on — people register, and then later cancel. To fill a hundred theatre seats, you must sell 150 tickets. When June 25th, opening day, arrived, registration was just over 300. It was the largest gathering of portrait artists in American history. The old patterns of art teaching were gone forever. A new vista of unlimited possibilities lay ahead.

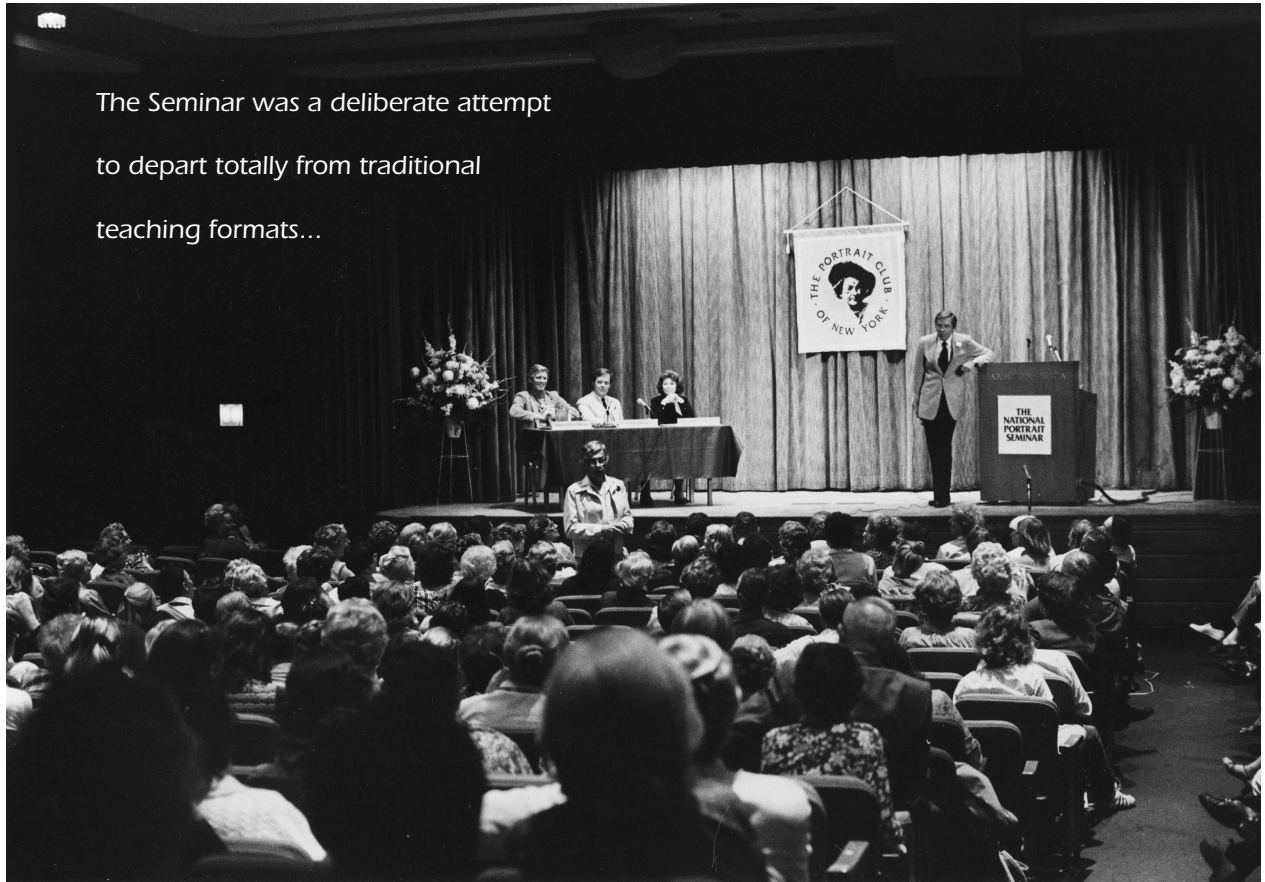


The Barbizon Plaza Theatre, designed by foremost Broadway stage designer Jo Meilziner, was located on Central Park South at Sixth Avenue, in the Barbizon Plaza Hotel.



The popular panel — Elizabeth Sanden, Robert Bruce Williams, Gordon Wetmore and Margaret Holland Sargent — was a key to the Seminar's success.

The Seminar was a deliberate attempt
to depart totally from traditional
teaching formats...



Opening day of The National Portrait Seminar 1979, in the Barbizon Plaza Theatre, New York. In a discussion of professional procedures, a seminar member stands to address the group. The agenda included both painting theory and technique, as well as professional and business matters. Seminar members were encouraged to participate in the wide-ranging conversations.



Daniel E. Greene

Famed artist and teacher Daniel E. Greene, conducting his immensely popular portrait classes at his Westchester County farm that summer, later wrote to John and Elizabeth Sanden, "I have to hand it to you. You had more students in one week than I had all summer long!"

After the meeting closed and participants got back home, letters began to arrive in the New York office. Patricia Street wrote from Lake Gem, Florida, "The Seminar exceeded my highest hopes. It would have been worth ten times the fee." From Atlanta, Mrs. J. Erskine Love, Sr. wrote, "Your meeting was one of my most exhilarating experiences."

Bronson Charles of Dallas was ecstatic: "What a marvelous experience you afforded us! I came away with renewed enthusiasm and ambition to paint." Dr. Randall Harrison, Ph.D., wrote from San Francisco, "Over the years, I've attended (and organized) a lot of seminars, in the university world, with some of the world's largest corporations, and with some of the biggest governmental agencies, and I can't remember when I've seen a more efficiently run or a more effectively presented seminar... I was particularly amazed with the quality of the content. I was truly amazed that you were able to meet the needs of such a large and diverse audience so brilliantly. My congratulations!" Mary Lou Fenton gushed from Baltimore: "The best run meeting I've ever attended!"

RIDING ON THE BACK OF A TIGER

The Sandens considered the venture a success, and reserved the theatre for the same week, one year later. Remembering, however, the antique Oriental parable about the man who found himself riding on the back of a ferocious man-eating tiger — he had to be very careful lest he fell off only to be immediately devoured by the tiger. John and Elizabeth realized that they were now riding on the back of a potentially dangerous tiger. It would be important to not fall off. Could the portrait work continue as usual, or would the annual meeting begin to devour the schedule? Would the Sandens be remembered as seminar promoters instead of portrait painters? The tension between the Seminar and the portraits would steadily increase, and John and Elizabeth could already feel the pressures.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

It was immediately decided to keep the meeting in New York for the foreseeable future. In spite of the costs and the potential hazards, New York was still a destination of glamour and excitement. The Barbizon Plaza Theatre had proved a perfect venue. So, for the next three years, the Seminar retained its New York identity. The Saturday evening banquet, however, had grown too large for the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel facilities. The finest facility in New York City — the famous Starlight Roof of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel became the new dinner location.



In New York, the Seminar dinner was held in the city's finest banquet facility — the famous Starlight Roof of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.



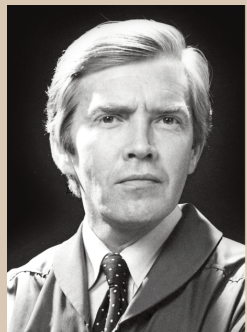
A Distinguished Faculty

From the very beginning, the key to the Seminar's success was its brilliant faculty. The artists were all top-flight portrait professionals, each with a national reputation, earned the hard way — in the trenches of day-to-day professional practice. Each was eager to share the fundamentals of their difficult and exacting trade with the large Seminar membership.

The guest speakers were giants in their own fields. Richard Ormond, great-nephew of John Singer Sargent (and later Editor of the massive Sargent *Catalogue Raisonné*), made his first appearance in America at The National Portrait Seminar. Dr. Bryant M. Kirkland and Dr. W. Frank Harrington were ministers of vast metropolitan parishes — Dr. Kirkland in New York City and Dr. Harrington in Atlanta. Their inspirational talks were brilliantly effective. Joni Eareckson Tada is a world-renowned artist, almost totally paralyzed by a youthful diving accident, who creates exquisite paintings by holding the brush in her mouth. She is one of the world's foremost advocates for people with disabilities. Donald Holden, editor and artist, is renowned as the “inventor” of the modern artists’ “how-to-do-it” book. M. Stephen Doherty was, for 31 years, Editor-in-Chief of *American Artist* magazine. He now edits the very popular *PleinAir* magazine.

Many of the faculty brought special expertise to the Seminar program. Gordon Wetmore was articulate on promotion and public relations. Robert Bruce Williams performed dazzling, bravura demonstrations with theatrical aplomb. Lee Lively had created a television service utilizing pastel portraits of news figures. Meg Sargent's experience as a television and stage actress gave her presentations grace and style. Cedric Egeli offered masterful lectures on painting theory and practise. It was a world-class team.

The Original Seven Leaders...



John Howard Sanden



Elizabeth Sanden



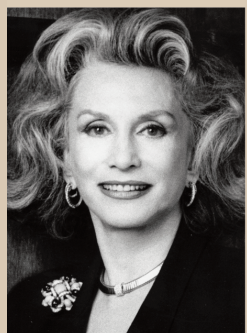
Gordon Wetmore



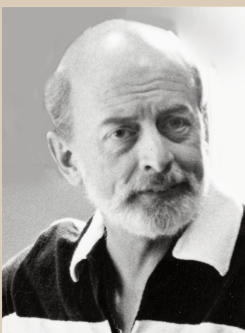
Robert Bruce Williams



Margaret Holland Sargent



Patricia Hill Burnett



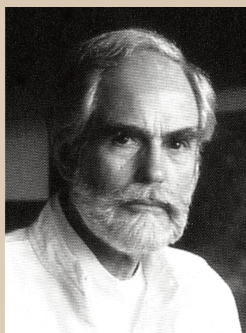
A. Lee Lively

“It was a world-class team.”

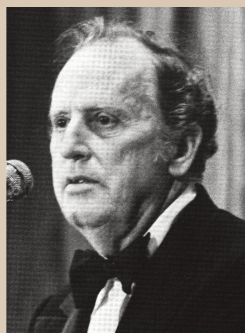
...Were Later Joined by These Important Artists and Guests.



Ariane Beigneux



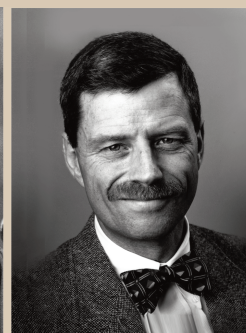
Marshall Bouldin



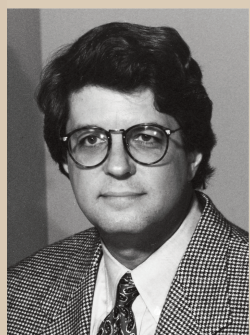
Paul C. Burns



Zita Davisson



M. Stephen Doherty



Tom Donahue



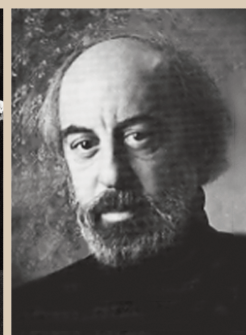
Gilbert Early



Cedric Egeli



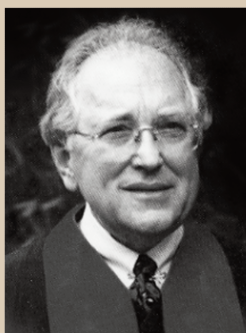
Andrea Ericson



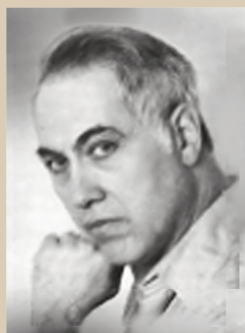
Daniel E. Greene



Annette Adrian Hanna



Dr. W. Frank Harrington



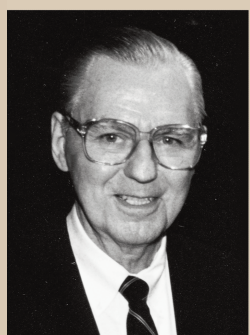
Donald Holden



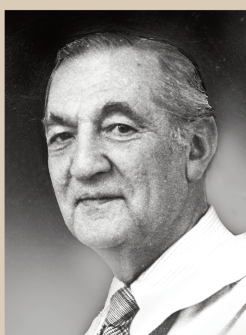
Edward Jonas



Ann Manry Kenyon



Dr. Bryant M. Kirkland



Samuel Edmund Oppenheim



Richard Ormond



Joni Eareckson Tada



Oldrich C. Teply

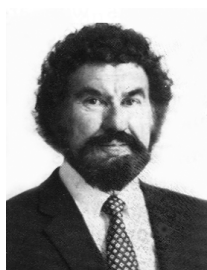
Four Membership Societies That Grew Directly From The National Portrait Seminar

Beginning in 1981, participants in The National Portrait Seminar used the Seminar popularity as a springboard to the launching of membership organizations.

From the beginning, John and Elizabeth Sanden experienced pressures asking that the Seminar constituency be formalized as a membership society. The Sandens viewed this with apprehension — this was one aspect of the ride they were having on the man-eating tiger. Both had strong portrait-painting careers, and this was uppermost in their personal priorities. A membership society would require permanent office personnel, and a further steady erosion of precious time before the easel. Their answer was no — someone else will have to do this.

1. The Portrait Society of Atlanta (1979 -

Following the very first meeting of The National Portrait Seminar in New York in the summer of 1979, a group of artists from Atlanta, Georgia, returned home inspired to create a membership organization whose main purpose would be “to educate the public to a greater awareness of the portrait as a valid and valuable art form.” The Portrait Society of Atlanta will celebrate its thirty-fifth anniversary on November 8, 2014.



Robert Fleet Hubbell
Founder

2. The American Portrait Society (1981-1982)

Next to step forward was businessman Robert Fleet Hubbell of Huntington Harbor, California, who had early become a Seminar regular and enthusiast. Hubbell announced the formation of the American Portrait Society, a not-for-profit entity to be based in Huntington Harbor. Hubbell announced that the Society would: (1) create a computerized national registry of portrait artists, (2) issue “certification” to artists deemed qualified, (3) compile and publish a directory of American portrait artists, and (4) begin publishing a magazine, *Profile*, devoted to professional portraiture. The Society realized all four goals, but ended and dispersed suddenly in 1982 on the death of its founder.



Leon Loard
Founder

3. The American Society of Portrait Artists (1991-1998)

Several years passed after the death of Robert Fleet Hubbell, before talk of a membership society of portrait artists was heard again. Championing the idea this time was Leon Loard of Montgomery, Alabama. Loard operated a highly successful business across the Southern states based on his abilities as a portrait photographer. His firm in Montgomery, Leon Loard Portraits, offered artist-enhanced versions of Loard’s portrait photography. Customers could select from a range of services, from hand-colored photographic prints to completely original paintings.

Loard, a charming and gregarious salesman, presented himself at the Seminar in Atlanta (1991) and asked permission to set up a staffed table during the conference to begin enrolling artists in his proposed “American Society of Portrait Artists” (ASOPA). The Sandens granted the permission and the venture was launched. The new venture, ASOPA, had greater prospects for success than had the American Portrait Society, for two important reasons. First, Loard had deeper pockets than had Hubbell. Loard placed the full support of his highly profitable business behind the new society — that support eventually surpassed \$600,000. But, far more important, Loard had enlisted a very valuable associate — none other than the Sandens’ closest confidant and partner from the fourteen years of the Seminar — Gordon Wetmore.

No one had been more closely involved in the creation and planning of The National Portrait Seminar than had Gordon Wetmore. John Sanden considered Wetmore his closest friend. There is no question that Wetmore’s amiable and charming manner, plus his genuine grasp of the keys to portrait success, all added immeasurably to the Seminar’s success. The Sandens had never presented a public program, going all the way back to the little fifty-member meetings at The Portrait Club of New York, without including Gordon Wetmore in the program.

Wetmore was well-equipped to assume a leadership role in Loard’s new organization. We have said that what the Sandens feared the most was that the popularity of the Seminar would begin to devour their careers as professional portrait artists. It was this fear that caused them to stand clear of repeated urgings to create a membership apparatus to undergird and sustain the annual meeting, deferring first to Robert Fleet Hubbell, and now to Leon Loard.

Loard had an established corporate structure in his Montgomery, Alabama, office. Salaried staffers were already available to shoulder the additional duties stemming from ASOPA.

CHANGES IN THE SCHEDULE

In a burst of ambition, the name of the annual event was changed in 1984 to The National Artists Seminar, and the conference was booked into the largest hotel in the world, the Conrad Hilton on the lakefront in Chicago. The announced agenda included presentations in all media, and registration soared. The 1984 event attracted almost 800 participants. Now the Sandens were really riding on the back of a man-eating tiger. Their own involvement in day-to-day portrait work, which had been shrinking steadily over the years of the Seminar, now showed the potential for vanishing altogether. They announced a halt. There was no Seminar for seven years, from 1984 until 1991.

During that seven-year escape from Seminar planning and administration, the Sandens’ personal income from portraiture increased ten-fold. The tensions and complexities melted away. Moving between their two studios in Manhattan and Connecticut, life had taken on a delightful smooth consistency. Only with the greatest of reluctance did the Sandens announce a Seminar for Atlanta in 1991. After it concluded, they let a year go by before mounting another (and final) National Portrait Seminar, also in Atlanta, in 1993.

THE ASOPA PORTRAIT FESTIVALS

As we have recounted, at the ‘91 Atlanta conference, Loard used the facilities of the Sandens’ meeting to begin the enrollment and formation of the American Society of Portrait Artists. Gordon Wetmore was announced as the chairman of the new group. Shortly after the ‘93 Atlanta meeting, Loard and Wetmore requested a meeting with the Sandens in New York. At that meeting, Wetmore amiably suggested that, since the Sandens “had now gone to an every-other-year schedule”, could not ASOPA present a meeting (to be called a “portrait festival”) in the alternate years, to be held in Loard’s headquarters city of Montgomery, Alabama.

It was a stunning proposal, striking daringly at John and Elizabeth's widely-known apprehension at being overwhelmed by the seminar business. Instantly both of the Sandens saw the proposal as their exit down from the tiger's back. Instantly agreeable, confirmed at once by a glance between them, the Sandens acquiesced, and the meeting was over. It was also the end of The National Portrait Seminar.

4. Portrait Society of America (1998 -)

After a period of time, tensions began to emerge between Wetmore and Loard. Leon Loard saw ASOPA as a privately owned corporation; Gordon Wetmore preferred a not-for-profit format, accountable to a board of directors. When it became clear that these conflicting views were unreconcilable, Wetmore announced that he was resigning as Chairman of ASOPA and withdrawing his support. The formation of a rival organization, the

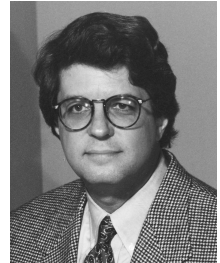
Portrait Society of America, was announced, resulting in a protracted political quarrel which lasted for several years. The Portrait Society, under the leadership of Gordon Wetmore, Edward Jonas and Tom Donahue, having the loftier longtime goals and purposes, prevailed. Wetmore, Jonas and Donahue had all been closely involved in the program of The National Portrait Seminar. Gordon Wetmore, as we have noted, was an integral Seminar participant from its founding, Donahue and Jonas participated actively in Seminar programs in the later years. Thus the Portrait Society of America proved to be the fourth and latest membership organization to arise directly from the groundwork of The National Portrait Seminar.



Gordon Wetmore

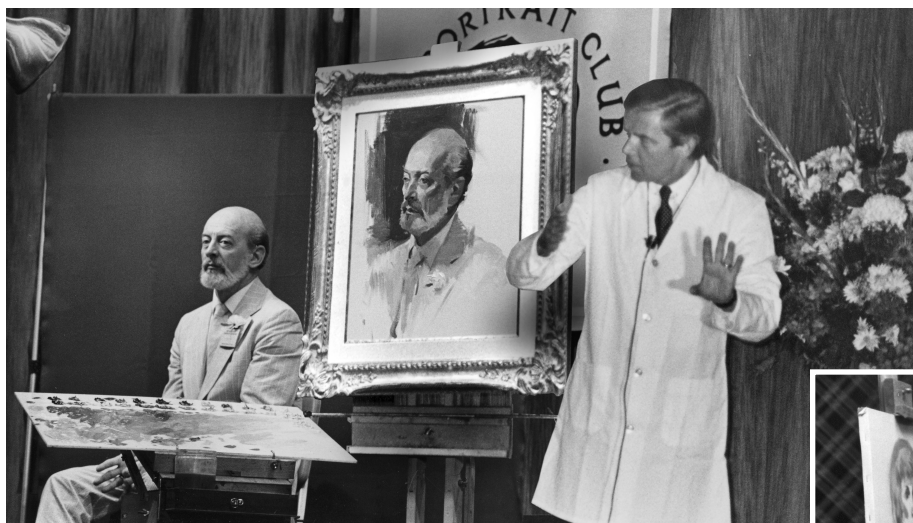


Edward Jonas



Tom Donahue

Teaching Demonstrations At The Seminar



John Howard Sanden painting Lee Lively.



Ariane Beigneux



Gordon Wetmore demonstrating in watercolor.

Throughout the week, the Seminar leaders offered demonstrations, with the emphasis on teaching and communication. John Howard Sanden and Robert Bruce Williams painted on the theatre stage, while other leaders offered concurrent programs located throughout the hotel's mazzanine complex. Members were encourage to move from demonstration to demonstration, observing and weighing differing approaches.



Elizabeth Sanden



Robert Bruce Williams paints Pam Sanden.

Seven Methods Pioneered for the First Time — Ever — at An Art Teaching Event

Theatre-style seating.

Instead of artists working at a small circle of easels, the participants were seated in rows, theatre-style. This one innovation increased the possible size of an art workshop from fifteen or twenty participants to many hundreds. This was the fundamental, revolutionary breakthrough of The National Portrait Seminar. It had never been tried before.

Theatre-style on-screen critiquing.

For critiques — an integral necessity for a painting technique workshop — the participants were once again seated in the auditorium theatre-style. The artists' paintings were displayed on the big theatre screen, for commentary by the instructors.

A national portrait competition.

The seminar participants, coming from all parts of the country and several nations, were invited to compete for certificates and cash prizes. As the Seminar grew in size, the competition was divorced from conference participation, and became a free-standing event.

Concurrent demonstrations.

Faculty members offered painting demonstrations concurrently, sometimes as many as seven or eight at one time. Participants circulated among the demonstrations, observing varying procedures.

Step-by-step art technique media presentations.

The Seminar was launched (1979) prior to the advent of widely-used digital photography. Nevertheless, kodalchrome slide technique yielded vivid big-screen step-by-step presentations of art technique.

Inspirational and motivational presentations.

Not just devoted to art technique and professional procedures, nationally-known inspirational speakers elevated the Seminar ambience with memorable motivational presentations. These speakers included Dr. Bryant M. Kirkland, Dr. W. Frank Harrington, and Joni Eareckson Tada.

Large-screen digital display of artist demonstrations.

When the Seminar launched in 1979, the technology (today so very universal) did not exist to project the artist demonstrations onto the large theatre screen. The technical capability arrived about 1990, and dramatically expanded the potential for the hundreds of participants to be visually involved.

Barbizon Plaza Hotel, New York

Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York

The Eight Meetings of **THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR** 1979 - 1993

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1979

New York City

The Barbizon Plaza Theatre

Barbizon Plaza Hotel

Participation: about 300

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1980

New York City

The Barbizon Plaza Theatre

Barbizon Plaza Hotel and Waldorf-Astoria Hotel

Participation: about 350

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1981

New York City

The Barbizon Plaza Theatre

Barbizon Plaza Hotel and Waldorf-Astoria Hotel

Participation: about 400

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1982

New York City

The Barbizon Plaza Theatre

Barbizon Plaza Hotel and Waldorf-Astoria Hotel

Participation: about 450

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1983

Washington, D.C.

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Capitol Hill

The National Portrait Gallery

Participation: about 500

THE NATIONAL ARTISTS SEMINAR 1984

Chicago, Illinois

The Conrad Hilton Hotel

Participation: about 750

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1991

Atlanta, Georgia

The Stauffer Waverly Hotel

Participation: about 350

THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT SEMINAR 1993

Atlanta, Georgia

The Stauffer Waverly Hotel

Participation: about 400

Total participation, 1979-1993: 3,500

Stauffer Waverly Hotel, Atlanta

Chicago Hilton Hotel, Chicago