

SAM GOODSSELL

Painting a compelling portrait requires masterly technique, but just as important is vision.

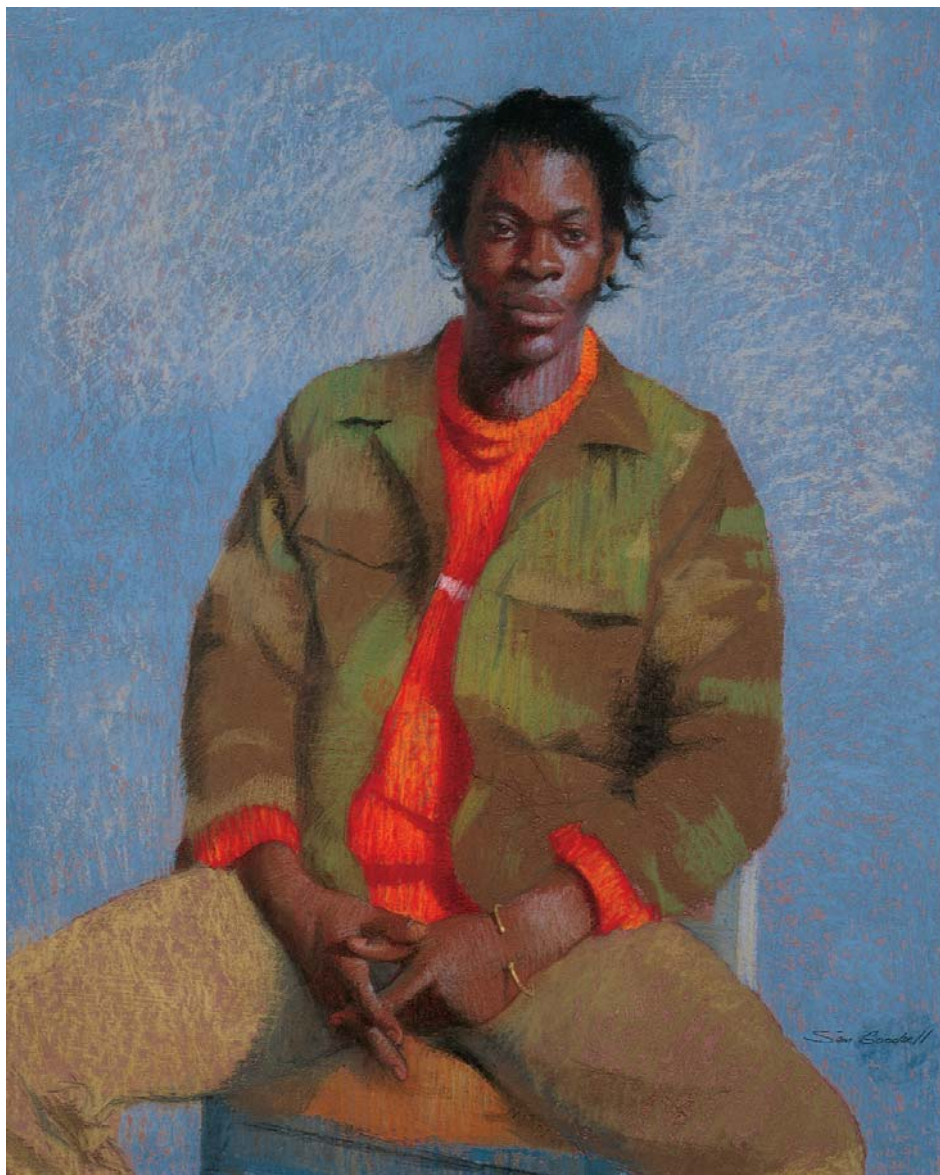
By Maureen Bloomfield

Michelangelo famously described the art of sculpture as liberating the form confined within the stone. Sam Goodsell describes the process of painting a portrait in a similar way. “In the beginning, it’s like a blob, a hunk of clay. It takes a while to grab hold of something, and once you grab hold of a certain area of the figure, it starts to grow. And then the rest evolves.” For Goodsell, who always works in natural light from life, painting is truly a process, unfolding, the way life does, in real time. “It takes me awhile to grasp what’s in front of me. I’m concerned, of course, about drawing, but what really concerns me is making that person what he or she is.”

A portrait like the prizewinning *Nina* (at left) evolves in the course of at least three weeks, five mornings a week. “It took awhile to zero in on her features, to grab hold of what makes Nina Nina,” says Goodsell. During that time, the artist and the model chatted about all kinds of things besides painting. “I make it my business to talk to whoever’s posing for me,” says Goodsell. “Not only because I want to get to know the sitter, but also because it helps me with my work. Once you’ve talked to a person, you realize she’s not like what you thought she was. That insight helps you develop a painting.”

The actual Nina is a Russian émigrée, who models for artists and is herself a performance as well as a studio artist. Goodsell has painted her many times. “We have a working history, a nice

Nina (at left, 60x40); *Harlemite* (below, 30x40)



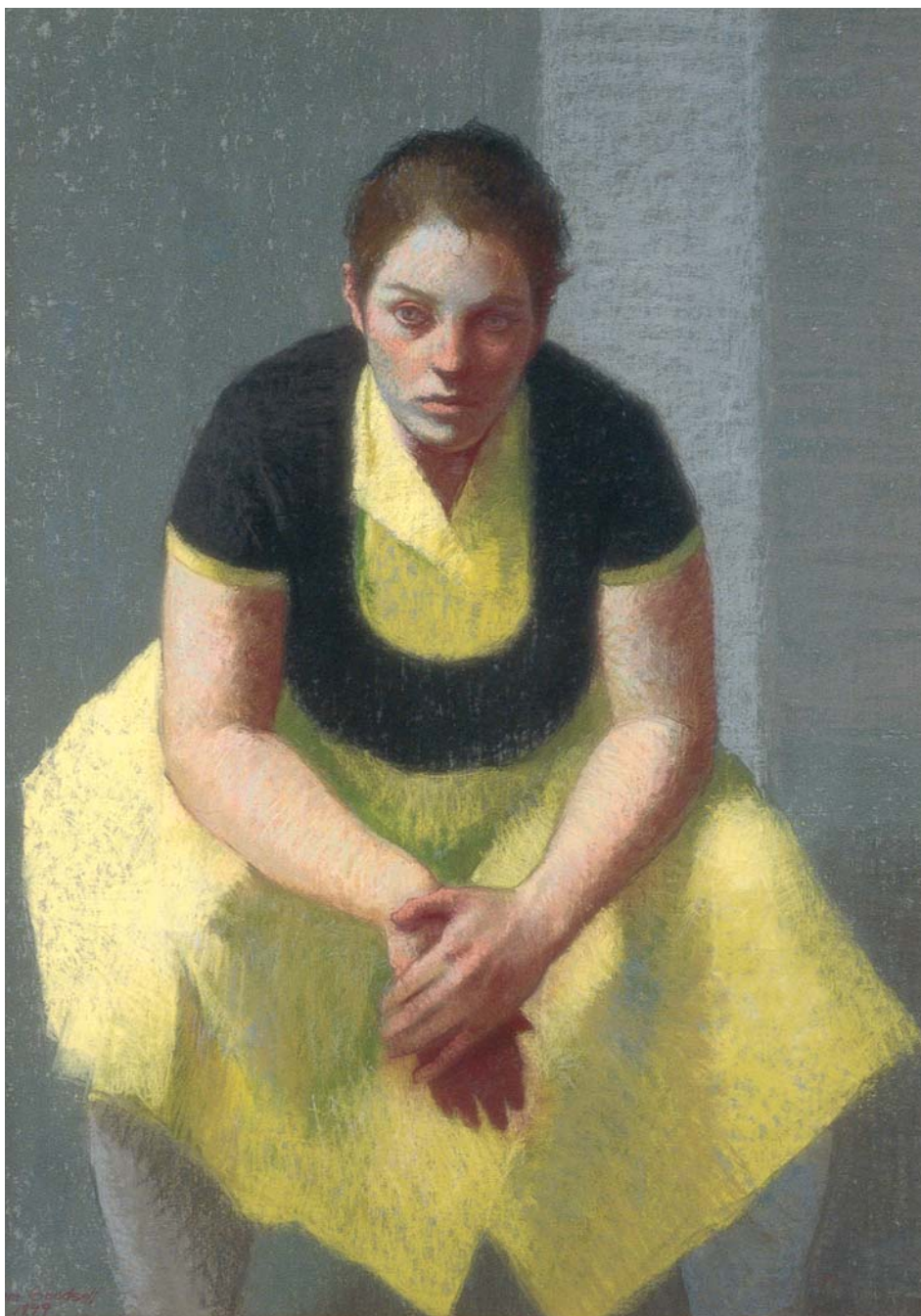
artist-sitter rapport. I don't know her really, but with each painting, I feel as if I know a little more. You can tell she's been through quite a bit, but she has pride and elegance, a poetic essence about her. She's a striking presence, a soft-spoken but powerful lady."

Part of being an artist is recognizing a gift and Goodsell knows when to accept what's in front of him. The magenta coat that's like a cape or mantle, the simple cross, the fiery skirt—just

happened. "She walked in with that beautiful coat draped over her shoulders," says Goodsell. "The colors were enriched by the natural light."

He started the actual process the way he usually does: studying the model and looking for the major shapes. He does a drawing, a small color study in pastel, where he's able to "figure out the totality of the picture, how everything relates to everything else. The study becomes the reference for the larger painting."

The Vision (40x30)



Goodsell's studio is stocked with a number of prepared boards (Strathmore 100 percent cotton, heavy-weight illustration board)—in different sizes and different earth tones of gray, red or green. Each board is coated with a pastel ground he makes himself by combining Utrecht gesso with Utrecht acrylic color and Rainbow pumice stone powder (available at lumberyards or hardware stores) in a ratio of 2 parts gesso to 1 part water. To this mixture Goodsell adds acrylic color and 5 (even) tablespoons of pumice stone powder (grade FF). The artist takes this prepared board and attaches it to a ½-inch foam board; the painting begins when he blocks in the major shadow shapes in charcoal. "If I say what a lot of people say, that I put down the darks and lights, that's not true. I establish the darks; I work toward the light." In contrast to many pastel artists, Goodsell never uses his fingers. "I just use the sticks, with no particular method or formula. Most people believe you should work with hard pastels in the beginning and save soft pastels for the end. I think hard and soft should be interchangeable. If the colors you want in the beginning happen to be soft pastels, just use them. The color and the value are what matter."

The Language of the Body

An important aspect of portraiture is finding the right pose, the attitude that reveals the sitter's personality. *The Vision* (at left) invokes Picasso's portrait of the American-in-Paris writer Gertrude Stein, who sat in a broken chair while Picasso confronted her powerful presence. Goodsell's painting *The Vision* employs the same strong angles and large masses, but Picasso's *Stein* is monochromatic, while Goodsell's *Vision* is striking in its contrasts (black and yellow; dark and light). The lighter shape behind the sitter was actually an opening in the room and, in the painting, implies a passageway. *The Vision* has an eerie power, partially on account of the model's death a few years after Goodsell had painted her. "While she was sitting for me, it was as if she were witnessing something, as if she foresaw something. My first title was

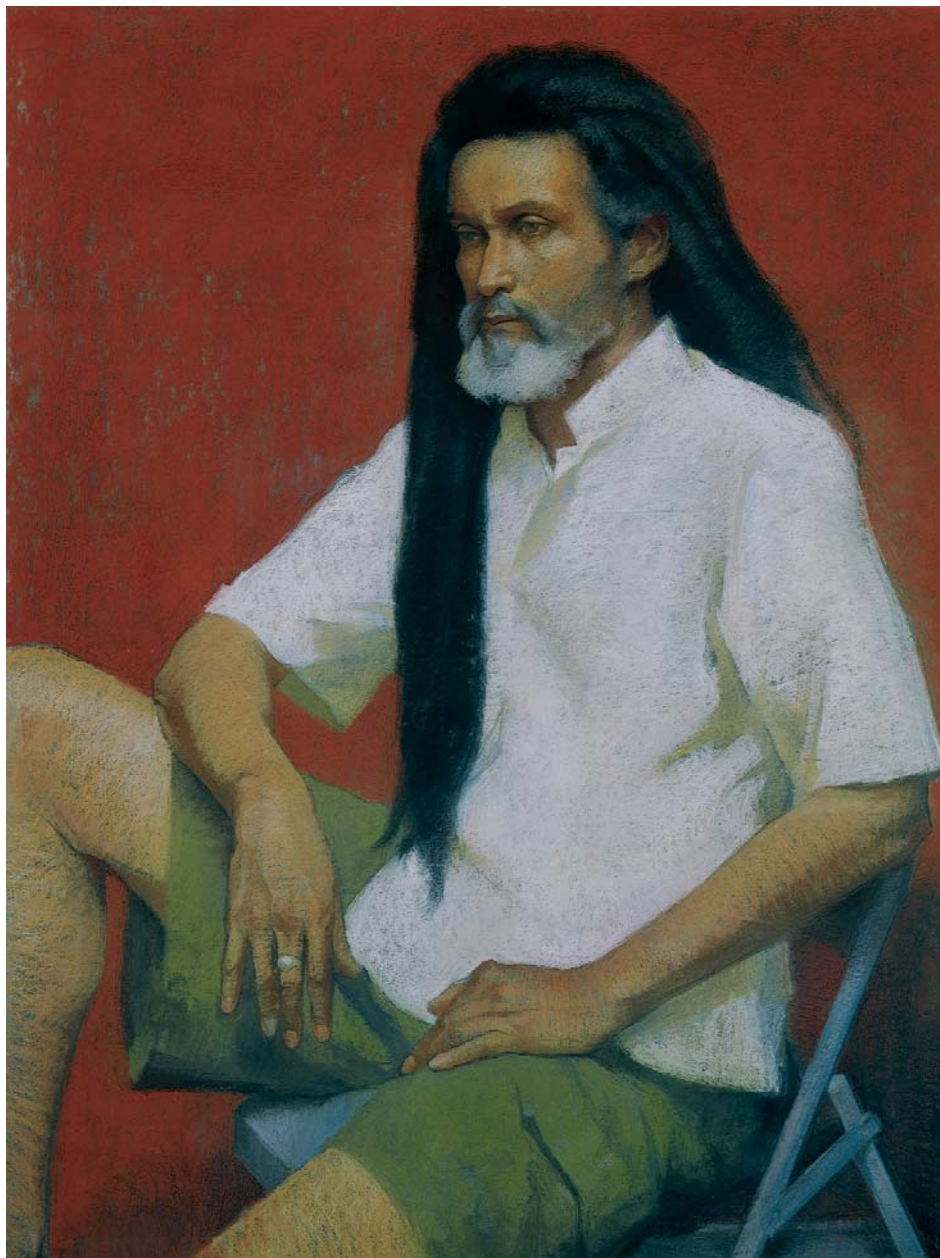
Vision of the Past, but it was perhaps actually, for her, a vision of the future.”

Figures recur in Goodsell’s work because he either starts out or ends up painting friends. The model who sat for *Preacher*, which won a prize in the portrait category (see page 50), is also the subject of *In a Silent Way* (at right). “Each time I paint Ralph, I see a different view of him. He has different levels, different facets. He’s a musician, a great flute player, a knowledgeable person. We can talk about all kinds of things. He lives on the Lower East Side in a flat that has an incredible number of books. He’s one of those really rare New Yorkers who’ve always been around, and the city’s changing around them. Each time I paint him, it’s a discovery.”

Fascination of the Human Face

It’s no surprise to learn that as a child, Goodsell drew compulsively. “I remember drawing the faces on *TV Guide*. My older sisters were teenagers when I was around 6, and they both studied piano and guitar. I remember a Glenn Campbell music book lying around, and I remember trying to draw him. He didn’t have a beard yet; he had that clean, kind of chiseled but round face. I tried to draw that face over and over again.”

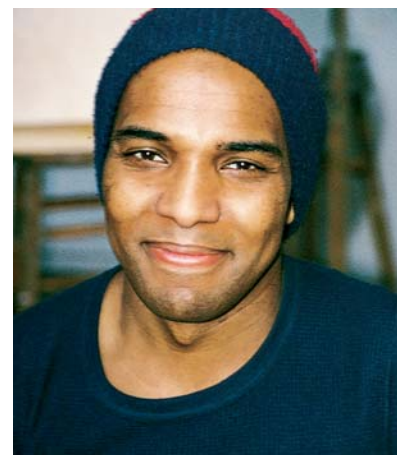
Goodsell’s real training started at the New York City High School of Art and Design in Manhattan, where he had the good fortune to encounter Irwin Greenberg, Irv Docktor and Max Ginsburg as teachers. “Let me tell you what these guys did,” recalls Goodsell. “They were frustrated with the art department because there wasn’t any training going on. In fact, they were the only three who really taught us how to paint the figure. They tried to do as much as they could within the confines of the curriculum, but another great thing they did was this: We’d all get together between 6 in the morning and the first bell at 8:30, and we’d get one of our classmates to volunteer to pose and we’d all paint from the model. After the last bell, we’d meet again for a few hours. These teachers had a large following. At the time we were really hungry. There was a big hunger for learning to draw and paint from life. It wasn’t available to



In a Silent Way (40x30)

us; if it hadn’t been for these teachers, it wouldn’t have been available at all. And they somehow did this for many years and produced, along the way, a huge number of great artists.”

■ *Sam Goodsell of Bronx, New York, studied with Harvey Dinnerstein at the Art Students League. In the 2003 Pastel 100 Competition, Goodsell won the Jack Richeson/Unison Pastels Best of Show award. He teaches at the Pastel Society of America and also gives private lessons. Contact him at sam.goodsell@yahoo.com.*



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