

A Possession that Possesses Me

By DAVID MASELLO



All morning, I have been admiring a painting I just bought — a portrait of a black-haired young man I know nothing about, except that he once posed in a classroom at New York’s Art Students League. This is not my first purchase from the League’s weekly student exhibitions: Every Monday the walls are filled with just-completed portraits of men and women — candid nudes, and figures fully or partially clothed. So different are the painters’ styles that it is not always obvious they have studied the same model.

Four Mondays ago, I noticed many versions of the man who now occupies a wall in my living room. In some depictions, he was decidedly handsome, with an even profile and wavy dark hair; in others, he appeared imperious and unkempt, his features even plain. But there was one version, by a student named Michael Elsasser, in which he was simply beautiful. It was before that version that I stopped to really look — and returned again after viewing all the other works in the room.

When visitors to these League exhibitions are interested in buying a work, they complete a form that is later handed to the student-artist in his or her classroom. It is then up to the artist to contact the potential patron. This very process is one of the thrills of buying at the League: You can imagine the student’s joy as he is handed a form in front of his classmates — a kind of love letter from a stranger who admires his work. And then there is the waiting period to hear from the artist. You start to worry whether he wants to part with the work, or might set the price too high. Every time, though, the artist has contacted me.

After we had corresponded by e-mail, Michael Elsasser came by my office to present his painting and receive my payment of \$450, the price he had set. He had protected it in bubble-wrap, though the sitter’s visage was just vaguely discernible. I could have unwrapped the painting right there, in Elsasser’s presence, but I wanted to delay that experience until I got home; I wanted to anticipate *that* meeting. And, although this has never actually occurred, I was also worried that upon seeing the work again, days after having first come upon it, I might not like it as much.

Elsasser began to tell me something about the model, but I didn’t want to hear these details for fear they might forever taint the way I see the work. All I remember now is something about this sitter being “difficult” — and I don’t know whether Elsasser meant difficult in demeanor or to capture on canvas. Elsasser definitely did say several times, with a certain bewilderment, “I just can’t believe a stranger took the time to come look at my class’s paintings.”



MICHAEL ELSASSER (B. 1955)

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 20 IN.

COLLECTION OF DAVID MASELLO, PHOTO: KEVIN NOBLE

The first morning of owning a painting is one of my favorite moments in life. I consider the first time I saw the work, how it occupied a gallery wall where others could see it, and how now it is something that only I own. No matter the subject — cityscape, landscape, portrait — there is a kind of romantic, even erotic, frisson to suddenly having the painting in my possession. It is as if the work chose me as much as I chose it, in a competition of potential owners. Elsasser’s young model is now mine, in a sense. For as long as I own the work — ideally, for the rest of my life — he will be a part of my life. I will likely look at him daily, because he lives with me on a wall in my home.

Paintings are my only possessions that continue to possess me. They are never inert objects of beauty. Rather, they always engage me; there is an ongoing dialogue. I have yet to become indifferent to any painting or photograph or drawing I own. I do not, and cannot, look at each one every day, of course, but whenever I do focus, I am captivated. The experience of looking

again at something familiar is, actually, an experience with the unfamiliar: I may discern new forms and figures therein, or I may merely reacquaint myself with a scene that offers pleasure. Either way, I am startled every time that a picture is capable of doing that.

The model in Elsasser’s portrait is posed in a rotated semi-profile. The sleeves of his white shirt are puffed in such a way that it resembles something worn by a nobleman in a painting by Bronzino or Parmigianino. He wears a brown vest and his neck is wrapped with a loose gray scarf that forms a wide, whirlpooling “O” on his chest. A gleam of light hits his high, smooth forehead, on which a curl of hair has fallen. His face is defined by a neatly trimmed, very short mustache and chin beard, and his lips are full and pink. The work is still unframed — and I may keep it that way, despite the brushstrokes that streak the canvas edges. Even the most minimal of frames will conceal part of him and cast obscuring shadows. I want nothing to get in the way of our getting to know one another.

I don’t know if, in real life, I would like this man: His gaze betrays a certain vanity, and I suspect he is well aware of his beauty. But I needn’t worry about his personality or politics. For me, he is perfect. ■

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