

# The Inner Light

## Grace Cole: *The Gift of Sight*

By Deborah Hawkins

**Editor's Note:** In honor of Women's History Month, we are profiling this long-established, sometimes overlooked, Chicago-based woman artist.

Amid the trends in contemporary art – from grand-scale and bold installations to digital techniques incorporated in photography and printmaking, portraiture does not get much attention these days. Indeed, the work of a portrait artist is less about his “vision” and flair for invention than it is about his “sight.” What makes a standout portrait is the artist’s ability to capture something essential, often elusive, about another human being because of the unique way he or she can see that person.

The work of Grace Cole reminds us how much more than craftsmanship is involved in producing great portraits. How she “sees” her subjects, more than simply her mastery of the media, accounts for how deeply a person can be affected by looking at (and into) the face of someone he or she has never met before.

Cole’s career as an artist was launched in a surprising way. Over twenty-five years ago, as an active member of a women’s association, she found herself supervising an event where an artist spoke on his life as an artist and teacher. His talk proved to be more than inspiring. After marriage

mind to grasp different perspectives. She took college-level anatomy courses so that she could be accurate with the details of faces and forms, and she raves about the impact studying sculpture at the Lillstreet Art Center in Chicago has had on her work in portraits.

“Sculpture is so tactile and energizing. When I learned to sculpt, to work with clay, it helped me understand texture, to think about what it would be like to feel a particular surface. Even when you paint, you’re sculpting in your use of dark and light. Sculpture helped me understand form in a three-dimensional way, which helped me execute what I saw in a two-dimensional format.”

Cole has a natural way of weaving her technical training, her regard for the masters, and her love of play into her work as an artist and teacher. She manages to find inspiration in simple observations of daily life and succeeds in infusing her drawings and paintings with the deep appreciation she feels for what she sees.

Frequent drives along I-57 with two of her daughters during their col-

other locations in subsequent years.

Her sense of belonging to the Chicago community of artists seems to be the seed behind her most recent and ambitious solo exhibition, “Face to Face: Chicagoans in the Arts,” which was shown this past November 2005 at the Fine Arts Building Gallery, 410 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago.

The “Face to Face” collection took two years to produce. It includes nearly 60 carbon pencil drawings of Chicago-area artists, art administra-



“David Kroll” from the “Face to Face” series

tors and art supporters. Although the works were professionally framed and arranged at the Fine Arts Building Gallery, the series evoked the feeling of turning pages in a family album. The show made it clear how great a sense of kinship and delight Cole derives from being a member of this particular community.

ing the shoot. Working from one or two photographs, she created likenesses that more than faithfully recorded the details of what she saw. Onto most backgrounds in the series, she also drew small symbols that reflected each subject’s work or a favorite interest. For example, in the background of her portraits of the Zhou brothers, she reproduced a small section from one of their murals; behind popular interior designer Alessandra Branca, she drew in an Oriental screen, an interior element that could easily show up in one of her room designs. In creating each portrait, Cole aimed to make something of that person’s spirit visible. A high compliment to her is when someone close to her subject makes the comment, “You nailed it.”

One of the things most admirable about Grace is that she supports herself from her art and art-related positions. Currently, she teaches students privately, but in the past she taught at both Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, IL and at the Ecole Albert du Fois in France, where she had previously been a student. In addition, she takes commissioned portrait work. Grace finds the artist’s career to be equally full of sacrifices and rewards, yet she feels very fortunate to have it.

Now a grandmother of children with degenerative vision conditions (portions of the proceeds from the “Face to Face” show have been earmarked for donation to the Hadley School for the Blind in Winnetka),

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and starting a family, Cole recognized a powerful longing to invite a new passion into her life. Shortly after the event, she began taking art classes and discovered she had a natural talent for drawing.

Her thoughts on this stage of her history speak volumes about her approach to art and the perfect choice she made in making "people" the focus of her work.

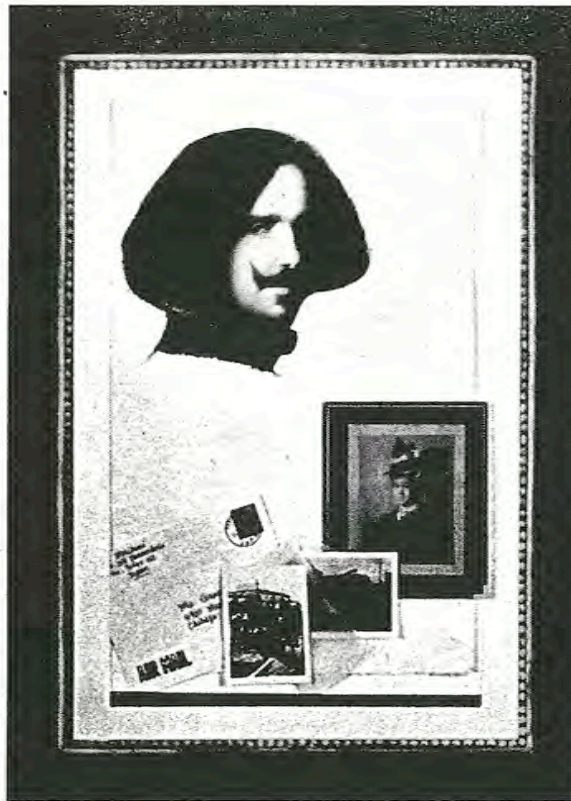
"We never know what is inside of us until we take a chance and try something. I admire everyone's talent. Some people play the violin. Other people are great at business. It's a shame that some people never take that chance; never find out what their special gift is. I started doing art as a hobby. I wanted something to get me moving. And now, I'm on a path of discovery. My life in art is beyond what I ever expected."

Her genuine respect for others, their talents and personal journeys, and her appreciation for being fully present in the moment, gives Cole the perfect temperament for her specialty and for her role as an art teacher. This orientation also explains a lot about her own choices for "training" as an artist.

While she has studied at the Ecole Albert du Fois in Les Cerqueis, France and the Portrait Institute in New York, most of her skills in drawing and painting faces have resulted from her own practice. That's not to say Cole has avoided the classroom. It's that her educational choices have been geared to satisfy areas of curiosity, not just to pick up new techniques with a pencil.

Cole has taken courses in philosophy so that she could enhance her understanding of life and train her

lege years inspired a series of prairie landscapes. The work of Rembrandt, Vermeer and other portrait masters led her to create a series of drawings and paintings she catalogs as "Old Masters, New Visions."



"From Valezquez 'Self Portrait' ", carbon and mixed media

In 2002, in honor of Leonardo Da Vinci's 550th birthday, she organized a group show with several of her private students. Cole's contribution to "Leonardo Re-visited" included works in charcoal, pencil, oils and mixed media. Originally at the Fine Arts Building Gallery, the show was re-mounted at the Moraine Valley Community College Gallery, Old Town's Triangle Gallery and several

people whose work I admired and even people I didn't know who I thought would make good subjects. All of them have contributed to the arts in one way or another. Even the faces of those who haven't 'made it,' their dreams and desire to create art despite the fact that it's not easy, inspire all of us."

Not limited to the visual arts, the grouping features some very recognizable names in Chicago's cultural community, such as: Richard Hunt (sculptor), Mark Hauser (photographer), John Mahoney (actor), Scott Turow (author) and Barbara Gaines (Director of the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre). The collection even includes a portrait of Ed Paschke, which was completed just one week before his death.

To follow her inspiration, like most artists, Cole had to stretch her comfort zone. To put this collection together, she had to start by calling her chosen subjects and asking them if they would agree to have their portraits done. Producing and including a portrait of herself, so that she could take her place within the community she so admires, required Cole to muster an added measure of boldness.

For each subject in the collection of 6" x 6" drawings, she shot a roll of film and carried on conversations dur-

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Cole is profoundly thoughtful about what a gift the sense of sight is. Yet, as a portrait artist, she reflects a much more spiritual appreciation for her gift. Even as a so-called, "realist," her focus is always on illuminating the beauty in the reality she sees and not on simply recreating it in paint or pencil.

"I could walk down an alley and see beauty. How a tin can might lean against a stack of newspaper – that's beautiful to me. Reality can be beautiful in surprising ways. It's up to each individual to find this beauty."

In addition to commissioned works, Grace Cole has shown at galleries in London, New York and Washington DC. Her "Face to Face" show will be on view again this June at the Gillock Gallery, 1402 1/2 Greenleaf St., Evanston, IL, 847.864-3799. An online portfolio of Grace Cole's work can be seen on her website: <http://www.gracecole.com>. Visit often for updates on future shows and for information on art instruction.

*Deborah Hawkins is a Chicago-based freelance writer.*