

interiors



Jaws of life ... twin sisters Sira, left, and Anna Giacco, 11, in front of their portrait set in the Australian Museum by their father, painter Francis Giacco.

Photo: Edwina Pickles

"I thought it would be lovely to capture them at this age, at a time in life that we've all enjoyed so much," Watts says. "I wouldn't have done them when they were toddlers with blue eyes and curly hair. It's nice at this age when they are not grown up, but not babyish either."

In the past few decades, portraiture has seen a significant democratisation in style and price, allowing the art form to reach beyond the precincts of the ancestrally wealthy (Watts paid about \$1000 for each piece). Far from the stiff, buttoned-up portraits of the early 1900s that were commissioned to denote the status of the subject, today's children are often depicted in a natural state, lounging in T-shirt and jeans, strumming a guitar or playing with a family pet.

Fedele believes art should be accessible to everyone, not just the rich and famous. "Not just the prime minister, Princess Mary, Princess Diana

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or Paris Hilton can have their portrait painted," she says. "It's for everyone. My whole aim is to paint an heirloom people can hand down to their kids, and their kids can hand down to their kids. Photos just don't cut it."

On canvas, time is frozen, the traffic of life is still and gestures are suspended before they can declare their purpose. "A portrait is a recording of the person that's very different from a photo," says Francis Giacco, who won the Archibald in 1994 with his *Homage to John Reichard*, the cellist. "You get a visual message from paint on canvas that's different from pixels. It seems to resonate more with people."

Taking his cues from the French painter Balthus, Giacco often paints children barefoot in dreamy interiors where they seem unaware of being watched. Cladia, a girl of 12 with a tousled, shoulder-length bob wearing a periwinkle blouse and white shorts crouches in a chair, knees folded under her torso, peeking over the back rest.

The Bellevue Hill artist often incorporates his twin 11-year-old daughters, Anna and Sira, into fanciful compositions. In a recent painting the pair of lithe gymnasts explore the Australian Museum. Anna leans over a table, dipping her head perilously close to the jagged teeth of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, while Sira looks defiantly at the viewer.

When photography became widespread in the latter part of the 19th century, many people guessed that oil-on-canvas portraiture would go the way of the dinosaurs. Although they would seem to be the natural enemy of painters, digital cameras are a useful tool for both artists.

Fedele studied under Giacco at the Julian Ashton Art School for two years and picked up his method. First they shoot their subjects in a variety of poses, make some quick sketches and then design a composite that incorporates different aspects into the final portrait.

"A pose tells you very much about a person. There's the psychology of body language," Giacco says. "You don't want to paint someone too stiff or too posey. You want to see the pose they fall into naturally. It's often beautiful and dignified."

Morning is often best for sittings, when children are rested and have energy and patience to stay in one place for more than a few minutes. "It's nice to get them not looking at you, but away," Fedele says. "It makes them feel more at ease with the whole process. You can give them a Harry Potter book and stick them in a beautiful chair in front of a window. They're in heaven and I'm in heaven."

Inquiries: Francis Giacco, 9328 3785 or 0425 277 463; Rosa Fedele, go to www.theartshow.net.au and search for Fedele's page for email contact.

Away with the pixels

Oils on canvas can resonate more than digital photos, writes Sarah Sheridan.

Among an art collection of about 80 pieces that includes watercolours of Masai women tending oxen, and a rough, impressionistic rendering of the Tyne Bridge in Newcastle, Sue Watts has a relatively new addition hanging above a stairway in her Balmain home.

Last year, she commissioned a portrait of her daughter Lily from artist Rosa Fedele. With head cocked and a long arm draped elegantly across her torso, Lily appears sophisticated beyond her seven years.

"It's just spot on," Watts says. "Lily is notorious for leaning over her head and questioning something. It's absolutely unbelievable that it's so real, so lifelike, almost as if Rosa knew her."

Watts and her husband Simon came across Fedele's work at an exhibition, liked her retro style, and on a whim decided to commission their daughter's portrait. In early November, the paint was still drying on a second portrait she had done of her son Fred, 11, to give to her husband as a belated 40th birthday present.

Strike a pose ... Lily Watts, as painted by Rosa Fedele.

Photo: Jennifer Soo

