

## Bettina: On Her Own Terms

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Bettina Steinke worked in a man's world, but on her own terms. Her first professional commission in 1937 produced portraits of 107 members of the NBC Studio Orchestra. Two of those portraits (Arturo Toscanini and Ignace Paderewski) are now included in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

For ten years, Bettina worked in New York City in a male-dominated business as a portraitist, illustrator, and artist for the war department. She married photographer Don Blair in 1946 and began a lifelong, synergistic work style that allowed them to excel in their preferred mediums. Assisting each other in their respective mediums, they moved to the Southwest where Bettina focused on painting portraits of Native Americans and the Southwest culture.

She preferred to go to the subject in his natural environment because she felt the person might be inhibited in her studio. Everett Raymond Kinstler described her as "...outspoken, funny, and tough. She deplored what she called 'commercial, slick portrait painters'." Kinstler described Bettina's method as very direct – no glazing or layers and added that she was a strong proponent of drawing and painting from life.

Taking six to eight weeks to create a portrait, Bettina would spend a day working with her subject doing preliminary sketches and color notes. Don's candid reference photos assisted Bettina in finishing the painting.

Ed Jonas, who studied with her said, "Bettina adamantly felt that women artists and men artists must compete head-to-head...that 'lowering the bar' for women would be doing them a disservice." Her views on that subject reportedly led her to decline honors offered to her as "The first woman to..."

In 1978, Bettina received the Prix de West prize for *Father & Daughter at the Crow Fair*. The National Cowboy Hall of Fame hosted a retrospective of her career in 1995. Bettina's work is included in museum collections at the National Portrait Gallery, The National Academy of Western Art, The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, which also houses a collection of her letters, business and personal papers documenting her success in a man's world.