



TODAY'S
MASTERS

LOVELADIES AND THEIR PORTRAITS OF HOPE

An extraordinary exhibition is coming to New York City's Salmagundi Club this season. On view there June 12-17, *Portraits of Hope* will feature more than 40 likenesses painted by artists including Samuel Adoquei, Michele Anderson, Larry Bruce Bishop, Phil Boatwright, Glenda Brown, Katherine Buchanan, Marc Chatov, Ellen Cooper, Stephen Craighead, Melissa Crawford, Barbara Davis, Grace Mehan DeVito, Michael Field, Kathy Fieramosca, Daniel Gerhartz, David Goatley, Kyle Keith, Carol Baxter Kirby, Carter Laney, Bart Lindström, Liz Lindström, Ying-He Liu, Heather Marcus, John Boyd Martin, Teresa Mattos, Jamie Lee McMahan, Steven Moppert, Mary Morvant, Sandra Murzyn, Michael Shane Neal, Richard Christian Nelson, Paul Newton, Mary Qian, Michele Rushworth, John Howard Sanden, Chris Saper, Sharon Sprung, Patricia Watwood, Jennifer R. Welty, and Dawn E. Whitelaw.

Beyond its substantial size, this show merits a note because it focuses primarily on women who don't normally capture the attention of such talented artists. All of the sitters are associated with The Lovelady Center (TLC), a faith-based facility in Birmingham, Alabama, where women come to live for nine to 12 months. Whether self-admitted or sent there by a judge, most "Loveladies" are recovering from addiction, domestic violence, and/or incarceration. Today TLC houses and feeds more than 400 women and 90 of their children at any given time.

The center was founded in 2004 by Brenda Lovelady Spahn and is directed by her daughter Melinda McGahee. Almost 20 years ago,



SAMUEL ADOQUEI (b. 1964), *Beverly McNeil*, 2022, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. ■
YING-HE LIU (b. 1952), *John McNeil*, 2014, oil on canvas, 44 x 29 in.

Brenda recognized the endless cycle that leaves many women feeling broken and without any hope that their lives can change. This, she notes, is "sadly understandable given the cruelties and hardships many of them have faced." When Brenda meets someone in this predicament, she tells her, "You are worthy," and also that "Your past does not define you — only what God, your Creator, says about you is what counts." By providing "hope to the hopeless," TLC

JOHN HOWARD SANDEN (b. 1935), *Brenda Lovelady Spahn*, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in.





DANIEL GERHARTZ (b. 1965), *Shay Bell Curry: Joy in Your Presence*, 2021, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



(ABOVE) MARY MORVANT (b. 1958), *Monica*, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. ■

(BELOW) DAWN E. WHITELAW (b. 1945), *Carrie: Into the Light*, 2021, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



helps residents redirect their lives and return to society as productive members of their communities.

Though she is already the mother of six, grandmother of 23, and great-grandmother of five, Brenda is now known to thousands of reformed women nationwide as “Mama,” and it seems only appropriate that TLC’s logo features a butterfly, which symbolizes “changes in life where we come to our fullness.” The center’s unique story has been chronicled in the 2015 book *Miss Brenda and the Loveladies*, which the founder co-authored with Irene Zutell, and which is now being adapted into a major motion picture.

Art entered the story via lifelong Birmingham resident Beverly McNeil, who owns the nationally recognized portraiture agency Portraits, Inc. In 2021, she established Portraits of Hope, Inc., in order to raise both funds and visibility for TLC, primarily by exhibiting portraits of the people involved. The sitters are not only TLC’s female residents, but also other women and men who contribute to its work, such as ministers and staff members. Beverly explains, “Art, especially portraiture, has always been a major passion in my life. Ever since my husband, John, started working at the center [as its chief operating officer and chairman of the board] almost a decade ago, our family has become quite connected to this incredible ministry. Through *Portraits of Hope*, I’ve been able to combine my passion for art with my connection to The Lovelady Center.”

In celebration of the portraiture collection and its showings at Portraits, Inc. and the Salmagundi, McNeil recently published the 112-page book *Portraits of Hope: Inspirational Stories from the Lovelady Center*. Inside are large illustrations of all the portraits, along with the powerful human stories behind them.

LIVES TRULY LIVED

Gracing the book’s cover is the Connecticut-based master portraitist John Howard Sanden’s likeness of Brenda Lovelady Spahn. In her 2015 book, she recalls being “a fairly successful businesswoman,



SHARON SPRUNG (b. 1953), *Paige Kote*, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 16 in.

mother, wife, and daughter. I went to church and even served on our church board. I was a 'good person,' I would think to myself. Was that not enough?" Apparently not. After modestly acknowledging that TLC "was not my brainchild, nor was it my vision," Brenda continues, "Most any day someone will thank me for starting the ministry and having such a great resource for hurting women. I have to tell them ... I never could have had The Lovelady Center without God calling me."

The only portrait in the new book painted posthumously is that of Shay Bell Curry, created by the renowned Wisconsin-based artist

Daniel Gerhartz. Brenda recalls that, on TLC's opening day in 2004, Shay was the first woman to step off the van arriving from Tutwiler Prison: she was "a bit scary to be around... like a keg of dynamite ready to explode." This was perhaps understandable given Shay's history of sexual abuse during childhood and then physical abuse on the streets. Now Brenda laughs that Shay "kept thinking her horrible life would run me off," yet she eventually became the founder's best friend (other than her own daughter, Melinda).

Eventually Shay joined TLC's staff and proved crucial in welcoming new arrivals, demonstrating how her own life had been transformed there. Ultimately, she reconnected with one of her daughters, married, bought a home and a car, and spoiled her grandchildren. Alas, Shay succumbed to liver disease at age 60, but her memorial service was, in Brenda's words, "fit for a queen, complete with butterflies



ELLEN COOPER
(b. 1957), *Rosie Mullen*,
2021, oil on canvas,
42 x 28 in.

and TLC women serving as pallbearers.” After completing his 40-inch-high portrait, Dan Gerhartz said, “From the moment I started hearing the stories of Shay’s electrifying and transformed personality, I envisioned this larger-than-life piece. My regret is never having had the chance to meet her and experience the wonder of her renewal.”

A different story lies behind the portrait of Paige Kote painted by the New York City artist Sharon Sprung. After an adolescence marred by alcohol abuse and being gang-raped, Paige went on to pursue a successful professional career. At 21, however, she tried alcohol again, soon getting entangled in an abusive, co-dependent relationship, then addicted to heroin. She recalls overdosing more than a dozen times, to the extent that she was actually medically dead on three occasions. Not surprisingly, Paige lost custody of her daughter and went to jail, but finally reached TLC. There she recovered fully and even joined the center’s staff as its graphic designer. Today she highlights her gratitude to the center “for the life skills, knowledge, and faith that people there instilled in me while going through the program.” Paige has lost countless friends to addiction, and now she honors their memories by staying sober.

One example of a portrait of someone who has not resided at TLC herself is Ellen Cooper’s likeness of Rosie Mullen. Rosie recalls being introduced to Brenda and TLC in 2006, two years after it opened. Soon she started volunteering, and within a year she had become its chief financial officer, while also ministering to the women. Looking back, Rosie has “watched God perform so many miracles time and time again; this is a place where everybody is somebody special and gets chance after chance to get it right.”

After completing the portrait, Ellen Cooper observed that Rosie “is vibrant, alive, and joyful, and so I wanted this entire painting to be warm and uplifting, brimming with nature, light, and color. Many women call Rosie ‘Mom,’ and here she appears to look toward the viewer with a motherly warmth and acceptance, as if she is gathering up her children and cradling them in the safety of her nurturing strength and God’s love.”

The new publication highlights almost 40 more such people and their remarkable stories; it can be ordered online or purchased at the Salmagundi Club during the run of the exhibition there. Even better, proceeds from its sale are being directed to TLC residents who have completed the program and are living independently again. ●

Information: *portraitsofhope.charity, portraitsinc.com, loveladycenter.org.* The exhibition will next be seen at the Mentone Arts Center (Mentone, Alabama) July 8–24. Beginning in January 2023, it will be presented at the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia. Once their national tour has ended, all of the portraits — currently owned by Portraits of Hope, Inc. — will be donated to The Lovelady Center, where they will hang permanently.

KELLY COMPTON is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.



PAUL NEWTON (b. 1961), *Jocelynn: The Gift of a Lifetime*, 2021, oil on canvas, 31 x 24 in.
