



## Bachardy, Don (b. 1934)

by Teresa Theophano

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Much of the public attention garnered by American painter and draftsman Don Bachardy has been the result of his long relationship with the late novelist and memoirist Christopher Isherwood. But Bachardy is an accomplished artist in his own right, and his talent has earned him considerable success on his own, as evidenced by his frequent solo exhibits, inclusion in many museum collections, and numerous reproductions and collections of his work.

Nonetheless, Bachardy has forthrightly acknowledged that the encouragement and support of Isherwood--the most frequent subject of his drawings and paintings--helped him gain the confidence to become a full-time artist. Moreover, Isherwood's distinguished reputation as a writer and his contacts in the film industry gained Bachardy access to many of the celebrities whom he was to draw.

Born in Los Angeles on May 18, 1934, Bachardy began drawing as a child. By his early teenage years, he was specializing in portraits rendered in ink and acrylics. Bachardy attributes his interest in looking at people to his childhood obsession with movies, a passion carried into his adult life. The close-ups of screen actors upon which he gazed as an impressionable child are at least partially responsible for his lifelong interest in portraiture.

Bachardy was only eighteen years old when he met Isherwood, who was thirty years his senior. The discrepancy in their ages shocked many of their friends; but in his memoir *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980), Isherwood observes that "I myself didn't feel guilty about it, but I did feel awed by the emotional intensity of our relationship, right from its beginning; the strange sense of a fated, mutual discovery. I knew that, this time, I had really committed myself."

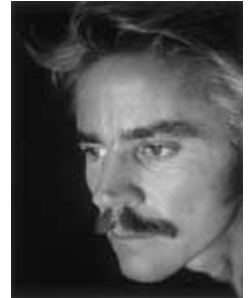
In another memoir, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), Isherwood describes Bachardy as "the ideal companion to whom you can reveal yourself totally and yet be loved for what you are, not what you pretend to be."

Bachardy was a student of languages and theater arts at UCLA when he met Isherwood in 1952 and began a relationship that lasted until Isherwood's death in 1986. The novelist was Bachardy's first live model, and his initial sitting in 1953 marked the beginning of a series of portraits that, to Bachardy, "encompass[es] the full range of my work as an artist and . . . represent[s] my best effort."

Bachardy was still drawing Isherwood--along with several of Isherwood's friends, many of them celebrities--when he enrolled at the Chouinard Art Institute in 1956. In 1961 he began study at London's Slade School of Art; that same year heralded his first solo exhibition, held at the Redfern Gallery in London.

Bachardy's drawings and paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian, the National Portrait Gallery in London, Princeton University, the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, and the University of California at Los Angeles, among many others.

His published works include *October* (with Isherwood. 1980), *One Hundred Drawings* (1983), and *Drawings*



A portrait of Don Bachardy by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

*of the Male Nude* (1985), all published by Twelvetrees Press, along with a collection called *70 X 1* (Illuminati, 1983) and *Last Drawings of Christopher Isherwood* (Faber and Faber, 1990).

Bachardy also collaborated with Isherwood on a television script, *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973) and on a dramatization of Isherwood's 1967 novel *A Meeting by the River*, which failed on Broadway in 1979.

Most recently, University of Wisconsin Press published Bachardy's book *Stars in My Eyes* (2000), a richly illustrated account of numerous sittings with various actors, writers, composers, and directors that Bachardy and Isherwood knew. The book's prose is culled from a journal Bachardy kept at Isherwood's urging, and validates the novelist's precept that art is often a record of the artist's own experiences, even when the focus is on the subject.

The fascinating comments on the sitters also vividly attest that Bachardy's acuity of observation and insight is by no means limited to his drawings, as when he shrewdly remarks of Peter Pears, "With his long, beaky face, he's like a hefty egret. His cold, blue, passionless bird-eyes are the darkest spots in their surrounding expanse of pink. His big clumsy hands are fleshy, like hunks of swollen pink dough."

Always preferring to draw live models rather than work from photographs, which dilutes the artmaking experience for him, Bachardy insists to this day upon completing every portrait in a single sitting. He describes a sitting as a "true collaboration" in which he receives energy from his subject.

Bachardy is probably best known for his nudes, which are at once erotic and dispassionately observed, and for his celebrity portraits. While his drawings and paintings of non-celebrities far outnumber the likenesses he has rendered of famous people, he has completed sittings with such well-known and diverse subjects as Myrna Loy, Ginger Rogers, Anais Nin, Gore Vidal, Jane Fonda, Katharine Hepburn, James Merrill, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Aldous Huxley, among many others. (He has also been the subject of works by artists such as David Hockney, whose masterful double portrait of Isherwood and Bachardy is justly famous.)

In the late 1980s, Bruce Voeller of the Mariposa Education and Research Foundation commissioned Bachardy to create a series of portraits of a dozen gay rights leaders. The series includes studies of Elaine Noble, Frank Kameny, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, Morris Kight, Charles Bryden, James Foster, Bruce Voeller, David B. Goodstein, Jean O'Leary, Reverend Troy Perry, and Barbara Gittings. In 1995, after the death of Voeller and the closure of the Mariposa foundation, the series was donated to the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University Library.

Among Bachardy's best known works are the frequently reproduced drawings and paintings of Isherwood that span some thirty years and capture the novelist in an amazing variety of moods; the famous likeness of W. H. Auden--his forehead a mass of wrinkles--that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, London; the haunting image of a haggard, aged Bette Davis, her downturned mouth held as though set in stone; and the intense and controversial painting of former California Governor Jerry Brown that hangs in the California State House.

Bachardy's portraits are not flattering--in fact, they occasionally seem cruel in their honesty--but in sure lines and deft strokes they convey with authenticity and accuracy the personalities of his sitters. Indeed, they are psychological portraits as much as they are physical likenesses. Almost Oriental in their economy of line, Bachardy's drawings distill the essences of his subjects, even as they also constitute a record of his own experience.

Bachardy's art is the subject of a short film by Academy Award-winning director Terry Sanders, *The Eyes of Don Bachardy* (2005). His relationship with Isherwood is the subject of Guido Santi and Tina Mascara's luminous documentary, *Chris & Don: A Love Story* (2008).

## **Bibliography**

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[www.americanartists.org](http://www.americanartists.org).

## **About the Author**

**Teresa Theophano**, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).