

The many faces of author Christopher Isherwood

Artist Bachardy has been capturing renowned writer's mood for 30 years

By Hunter Drohojowska

Christopher Isherwood has grown old with Don Bachardy. A friend for 30 years, Bachardy, 48, has been drawing the celebrated writer, 78, since they first met, including the cover portraits for all his books. Like Isherwood's prose, his images are sharply descriptive, with clinical

attention to detail and subtlety. In many ways, Bachardy's drawings are the visual equivalents of Isherwood's writing.

"Don is a person who, if he hadn't been a graphic artist, he'd have been a writer," observes Isherwood. "He sees things very quickly. It might frighten some sitters who think, 'I must not go near him, he'll uncover my secrets.'"

Bachardy's portraits often are so revealing, in fact, that self-protective sitters probably should be wary — but there's no evidence that they have been. During his career, he's drawn hundreds of renowned personalities, and this fall his work will appear in two books. One features 100 portraits of musicians, actors, directors and

writers, including Isherwood, while the other includes 70 drawings of artists. (The latter will be the subject of an exhibition at the James Corcoran Gallery.) In addition, a survey of his drawings will open Sept. 6 at the Municipal Art Gallery.

His favorite model, and the initial inspiration of his productivity, however, remains Isherwood, who'd been the subject of portraits by many artists until he met Bachardy in 1953. "It was already noticeable, even to someone who was a non-professional like myself, that he had extraordinary skill, particularly in rendering hair. I remember being quite struck by that," recalls Isherwood.

In 1956, Bachardy, who was 21, enrolled at Chouinard Art

Institute — now CalArts — in Valencia. His classmates included Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and other soon-to-be-famous artists. While they practiced some permutation of abstract or pop art, Bachardy studied the human expression. "During the '60s, I felt like a real outsider. But it was not an heroic choice of mine. (Figurative art) was all I wanted to do. Even now, I couldn't do an abstract painting to save my life. It would have to be an abstraction of a face or a figure."

Bachardy dates the beginning of his professional portrait career to 1960, when film director Tony Richardson asked him to do sketches of Angela Lansbury and

Faces/C-6, Col. 3

Bachardy's renderings of Isherwood (from left) dating from 1961, 1966, 1971 and 1979.



Faces

Continued from page C-1

Joan Plowright for use onstage in "A Taste of Honey." "He only wanted crude drawings," Bachardy recalls, "but I wanted to do the best I could. He was so pleased (with the results), he told me to do the whole cast. Then he took them to New York and put them up outside the theater. And that was enough encouragement for me."

That season Bachardy did drawings for three Broadway productions. The following year, he began exhibiting his portraits, first at the respected Redfern Gallery in London, later at the Rex Evans Gallery here. While attending Slade School of Art in London, he continued to illustrate Isherwood's short stories and books. But it was not until 1974 that he felt confident

enough, in large part because of support from the Nick Wilder Gallery in L.A., to begin working in color as well as black and white.

But it was Isherwood's faith in the young artist's talent that has produced a lifetime of portraits. As the years pass, Isherwood is revealed as ever pensive, sometimes stern, occasionally vulnerable. His eyebrows are veritable thatches guarding the eyes. The angular nose is treated prominently, a sign of importance. The evolution of line and shadow creates the Isherwood personality.

The task has not grown easier with familiarity. "Christopher is more difficult to draw than any of the other (personalities)," says Bachardy. "I know so much about him, it's difficult to get one version of him, and, of course, he's changing all the time. He goes through extraordinary mood changes in the course of a half-hour. It's a challenge the more I work with him to get a mood that maybe I haven't gotten before."