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Portraits of an artist

By Jessie Moniz

A Canadian painter who has visited Bermuda for more than 40 years has been left "blushing" after one of his portraits was selected to hang at Windsor Castle.

Bernard Poulin, who lives in Ottawa, Canada, was recently selected to sketch a portrait of former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, after he was given the prestigious Order of Merit by the Queen in July 2009.

"The Order of Merit is the highest award you can receive from her because it is personal," said Mr. Poulin.

The Order was founded in 1902 on the coronation of King Edward VII to give special recognition to those who had rendered exceptional service to the Crown or towards the advancement of the arts, learning, literature and science.

It is restricted to 24 members, with a small number of additional foreign recipients.

Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela, are among people to receive the Order of Merit.



Self portrait of Canadian artist Bernard Poulin, a frequent visitor to Bermuda.



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The award includes a special portrait to hang at Windsor Castle. The portraits are all head and shoulders done in pencil. It is traditional for the portraits to be not only signed by the artist, but also by the subject.



Portrait of Canadian Prime Minister Right Honourable Jean Chrétien as sketched by artist Bernard Poulin. This portrait now hangs in Windsor Castle.

There are many prestigious artists in the Order of Merit portrait collection including John Singer Sargent, Bryan Organ, Emma Sergeant, Carel Weight, Daphne Todd, John Wonnacott and Lucian Freud, among others.

"I'd love to be able to see the collection," said Mr. Poulin. "I can only blush that I am hanging with the likes of John Singer Sargent and Lucian Freud.

"It is humbling to sit back and think I am in the same room as these guys. I am a hero worshipper. I love to admire great people who accomplished things that they have worked hard for."

Mr. Poulin first met Mr. Chrétien through his wife, Senator Marie Poulin. He has previously done a painting of Mr. Chrétien, to hang at his alma mater.

"After he was selected for the Order of Merit he was told that since he is Canadian, he should get a Canadian artist to do his portrait. So he asked me.

"Once you are selected to do a portrait for people who have received this honour, you do not discuss it until it is finished. And even once it is finished, the Queen still has to officially approve the portrait."

But Mr. Poulin's work has now been approved and now hangs in Windsor Castle. But this was not the first of Mr. Poulin's portraits to be admired by royalty. He also painted a portrait of Prince William at the age of three, that now hangs in St. James Palace.

Mr. Poulin said he has wanted to be a portrait painter since he was a small boy.

His father was a mechanic and was not very pleased when Bernard Poulin, at the age of eight, announced he was going to be a portrait painter.

"My father interpreted it as I wanted to starve for a living. To him a good solid eight to ten hour day of hard work was what men did."

Mr. Poulin said luckily, his father lived long enough to see his son make a go of portrait painting.

Mr. Poulin first visited Bermuda in the 1960s to escape the stress of working in a psychiatric hospital at that time.

"My friends thought I was overworked and sent me on a vacation," said Mr. Poulin. "The first flight out of Canada was to Bermuda, so that's where they sent me."

He and his wife have now been coming to the Island for several decades. Mr. Poulin said when he is here, he has certain places that he likes to paint over and over again.

"I have 15 paintings of the Granaway Garden in Warwick. I paint it for the sheer pleasure of it. Sometimes it is really over grown and other times it is beautifully manicured but there is always something to paint.

"Although I have been going to Bermuda for 40 odd years there are still places I haven't seen. There are still wondrous places to paint. There is always something new to discover."

As well as Bermuda landscapes, he has also painted the portraits of many important Bermudians including former Premier Dame Jennifer Smith, Dame Lois Browne Evans, Stanley Lowe, Speaker of the House of Assembly, and Mayor Jay Bluck. Some of his Bermudian portraits hang at City Hall and at the House of Assembly.

"I really enjoyed doing those," he said. "I have also done the portraits of nearly 100 children on the Island. When I am there, people often come up to me and say, 'do you remember me. You painted my portrait as a child'. Some of them I recognise, and some I don't."

He said that when it comes to painting children, it is fascinating to think that he is painting future lawyers, mechanics and doctors.

"You never know what they will become," he said.

For more information about Mr. Poulin, see his website at <http://www.poulinstudios.com/>.