

# The Totem Portrait with Postcards from the Past

*by Stan Kaplan*

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As an artist, from the age of thirteen to the present, I have made portraits in every medium. I was always fascinated with the human head — looking at eye contact for acceptance, the mouth for verbal comprehension, and the movement of the head for gestural communication.

Traditional paintings and photographs show the individual from one point of view in space and one moment in time — a concept of reality inherited from the Renaissance. But cultures with deep ancestral carving traditions had a more inventive approach. The Egyptian sarcophagus carried a likeness of the Pharaoh alongside sequential hieroglyphics and pictographs depicting his life. The Northwest Coast Indians made totem poles as portraits of their tribe's legends and myths, carved with animal symbols in a montage configuration. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the cubist artists expressed a new concept of time and space, borrowing from aboriginal and children's art styles.

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## FIVE CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

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Although the traditional portrait remains popular, I am drawn to five contemporary approaches:

### **Pablo Picasso**

His paintings and sculptures reflect the flatness and boldness of African art, portraying parts of the face — front and side — freely assembled into a new intuitive amalgam, where line, shape, and color express the subject in a fresh composition.

### **Robert Rauschenberg**

He builds portraits from imagery found in magazines and newspapers, assembling them into a montage and adding paint for a personalized statement.

### **David Hockney**

He photographs a person multiple times, cuts the images into fragments, and reassembles them so three different views of the facial features juxtapose one another.

### Marisol Escobar

She makes standing figures using wood in box and block form — parts sculptured, penciled, and painted into an assemblage that teases the senses with humor and invention.

### Andy Warhol

He assembled many candid, passport-like photos of a person on a vertical-horizontal grid, adding mood color to each — suggesting the stills of a storyboard for a motion picture.

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## WORKING WITH WOOD

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My approach to the portrait stems from my printmaking, wood murals, and book art. I began working with wood when printmaking became my medium of expression, which eventually led to wood plank murals. Instead of printing from the wood, I carved, painted, and stained it as an end in itself. I found wood to be flexible and a joy to work with because of its organic warmth and beauty, and in plank form I saw the possibility for inventive spatial creations.

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*“Not skilled or trained as a carpenter, I — like the Northwest Coast Indians — worked with simple tools on ¾-inch planks, freely using concave and convex shapes alongside natural and painted areas.”*

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I also learned from eighteenth-century American wood carvers that wood breathes. They made structures from carved pieces that fit into one another for a dimensional whole. I enjoy shaping, carving, sanding, staining, and painting wood, and the challenge of solving difficult structural problems.

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## THE BOOK AS ART

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When I discovered that the book format could be another space for personal expression, my creative efforts moved in that direction. The book as a kinetic, tactile, and formal experience — with a flow of sequential images held in one’s hand — is what is known as an artist’s book, or book art.

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## THE TOTEM PORTRAIT

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Recently, after a trip to Alaska that rejuvenated my love for working with wood, I created my first totem portrait. Using photos of the front and side views of my head, I made a cubist-like face with intersecting planes of wood. From family albums I chose images spanning my childhood to the present — the symbols and myths of my life, in a sense. Using cut-out color-aid paper shapes and parts of the photos, I composed sixteen postcard-sized images, then arranged them in an accordion-fold book attached to the bottom of the portrait.

Each head I make is a unique challenge, as I combine a lifetime of artistic skills with my enduring interest in people.