

Portrait of the Week: Pure Joy and Character

By **Andrew Webster** - February 9, 2017



Mary Pettis, "Russian Fisherwoman," 2009, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. © Mary Pettis 2017

In this ongoing series, Fine Art Today delves into the world of portraiture, highlighting historical and contemporary examples of superb quality and skill. This week we detail a visage that will undoubtedly leave you smiling.

If everyone could be as happy as Mary Pettis' "Russian Fisherwoman" all the time, the world would be a much better place. With Pettis' careful yet expressive touch, this week's feature portrait radiates pure joy and character. Tightly cropped and captured in full length, a hearty and hefty woman sits on a bench in front of her merchandise while enjoying a cigarette. As she casually leans toward the viewer, Pettis has captured her visage in a snapshot instant. Warmth and happiness emanate from her face, her eyes piercing and her cheeks flushed. I like to believe she's been caught in the midst of retelling a fantastic story or local joke, a welcoming proposition that gives the piece intimacy and familiarity.

It was 2009, and Pettis — along with a group of several other artists — was traveling through rural Russia. Although it was bitter cold and deep within the Siberian winter, routine continued with fervor in a small fish market. "I first saw her from the window of our bus traveling along the outskirts of a little Russian village," Pettis recalls. "We hadn't planning on stopping at the makeshift fish market, but several of us called out at once, 'Stop the bus!'" There must have been something special about the market that spoke to this group of creatives, perhaps a strong sense of local, untouched culture, the Siberian

natives, or perhaps the flashes and ribbons of color in an otherwise bleak season.

Pettis says, "I was struck immediately by her large, homespun happy aura (I'm thinking that a good day fishing may be akin to a good day painting!). I loved the raw contrasts — the incongruities: the bright red shirt under camouflage, her unabashed joy amid the February bleakness. I felt her powerful presence would be best expressed with a close, pyramidal composition, heavy textures, and lively, unedited *alla prima* brushwork. To this day, I can't help but smile when I look at this painting of her."

Indeed, Pettis achieved her goal with such success that reactions from viewers are largely the same. It's hard not to feel the subject's sense of satisfaction, joy, leisure, character, and warmth — perhaps the ultimate indicator of a superb portrait.

To learn more, visit [Mary Pettis](#).

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