

# 'THE EYES HAVE IT'

Peninsula artist nurtures talent for portraying the souls of cats and dogs

By LYNDA LANE  
For EO Media Group

LONG BEACH, Wash. — For artist Annie Unwin, few projects evoke as much intense emotion, in her and the recipients alike, as pet portraits. Sure, she does striking landscapes that lead one's eye and mind right into the scene, but when she paints a detailed likeness of a dog or cat, especially if it is one the owner has recently lost, it tugs at heart strings.

The first time she attempted a canine portrait, Unwin recalled, "was when a friend of ours lost her teenage dog named 'Bubbles.' She posted his photo on Facebook and I thought, 'I've got to do something for her, because she was just heartbroken.'"

From that Facebook photo, Unwin noticed that Bubbles had beautiful features and she worked hard at rendering them in a resulting painting. At that point, she didn't tell the grieving owner what she was up to. But an opportunity was coming up, as a Peninsula Arts Association show was being hung the very weekend the painting was completed. So, Unwin made sure it was on the wall. Then, she threw a hint to Bubbles' owner.

"I told her to come to the PAA show, that I had something to show her," she said. The woman came, looked at the painting of her beloved Bubbles and, Unwin said, "We both just stood there and cried. She was so touched and she said, 'Now, I've got him forever.'"

After that, other friends said final goodbyes to their old pets and Unwin also surprised them with portraits. One was of a cat, Luke, that a high school friend had lost. Unwin sent her a painting of Luke and the woman responded, by saying, "I can't ever repay this."

A pet lover herself, Unwin realizes that losing an animal "is like losing one of your children." And every time someone reacts with such appreciative emotion to one of her pet portraits, she cries. "It's so touching to me. I love being able to do that."

Soon after painting some as gifts, pet portrait commissions started rolling in. Some of the animals were still alive and thriving, some weren't. But whatever the circumstances, Unwin has always loved painting them.

## The eyes have it

For Unwin, capturing a pet's personality depends on how well she can render the eyes.

"Their eyes fascinate me," she said. As one example, she held up a painting of a Maine Coon cat named "Aimee," who lives with her owner in Germany, as one of that owner's all-time-favorite kitties. For this portrait, Unwin worked off a photo of Aimee that was on Facebook. She commented about the feline's "beautiful golden eyes that are her essence."

Painting a pet portrait from a photo is what Unwin prefers, as long as it's a quality photo to begin with, especially one that clearly shows the animal's eyes. And, she said, "I like the picture shot slightly slanted, so there is some kind of light and dark and hue."

Unwin and her spouse of 29 years, Jim, are both accomplished photographers. If someone who wants a pet portrait is local, Unwin said she would have no problem with shoot-



Photos by Lynda Lane/For EO Media Group

The eyes have it. Through precise rendering of an animal's eyes, Unwin says she can show its personality in her pet portraits.



Annie Unwin, at the kitchen table of her rural Long Beach, Wash., home. She does several mock-ups of her paintings, before doing the final work. This was a pet portrait commission.

ing the photos herself, but will she ever ask a pet to pose? Absolutely not, she said. "You can't have a dog or cat sit and pose like you could with a person. They'll move or jump down."

Three days a week, Unwin works at The Picture Attic for Jean Nitzel, who also stresses the importance of quality photos for portrait reference. Nitzel commented that Unwin is a stickler for detail, "And she'll keep at it until she gets it just right." The proper likeness is, indeed, much more attainable when good photography enters the picture.

One case of good photos led to an Unwin triple-dog portrait, a commission from the owner of a Boxer, an expressive Shar Pei and a pit bull. Working from three separate pictures, she put them all in the same painting.

## Mock-ups first

As part of her penchant for getting details right, Unwin does as many mock-ups as needed before working on the final portrait. In the case of the three-dog portrait, she recalled that she did six mock-ups. Each dog had a different degree of difficulty to consider. The pit bull was the hardest to render, but the most fun of the three, Unwin said, was the Shar Pei with its deep distinctive wrinkles, which, she said, made for more character.

Unwin did this portrait in pencil and then "added a watercolor wash in the background and foreground, so it gave them a bit of contrast."

With some portraits, she stays with total watercolor and explained that she is not a typical user of that medium, "in that I don't use

heavy water. I work in dry brush. I'm able to get more depth this way, more color and more detail."

## Working with a feline assistant

Even with dry brush, Unwin does have to use some water, especially for applying washes or just rinsing out brushes. One of the Unwin family cats, a striped male named "Gabby," is a self-appointed assistant who will pester her into giving him the attention he is so sure he deserves. He tries to drink the brush water and has walked across wet paintings with no hesitation.

Unwin actually calls her studio her "craft room" and it doubles as a guest bedroom. If Gabby is loitering on the desk when she's painting, Unwin admitted she has to be firm. "I just have to say, 'No! Down!' He'll get on the bed and face the closet door, like he's pouting. But that's his punishment and he knows he has the option of sitting down and behaving himself."

Anyone who has ever visited the Unwin home knows Gabby. He likes being in the middle of everything. He crawls up on keyboards in Jim Unwin's computer room and before closing a laptop, Jim has to be sure the cat's tail is out of the way.

Gabby was found abandoned, sitting in the middle of a road, by Unwin's son about four years ago. "There was nobody around," Annie Unwin said.

The other Unwin cat, a Maine Coon named "Patsy," stays out of any action she can avoid. But at least with Gabby's persistence and Patsy's aloof personality, Unwin has a wealth of cat eyes in the house, if she wants to study them up close and personal.

## Early interest, late start

As a child, Unwin was interested in drawing, coloring with crayons and just general projects, but later, other interests took hold and she said she just got away from art completely. But about 25 years ago, that changed.

"I was working in an office job that was really stressful," she recalled. "I came home one day and Jim said, 'Annie, go take a class some place to de-stress.' So I went to the local college and signed up for a watercolor class. When I first started, I thought, there's no way I'm going to be able to do this."

But the instructor encouraged her to stay with it, saying, "I can see you've got a penchant for color."

Unwin not only stuck with it, but started taking more classes — drawing, learning perspective, pastels and other methods. Her art abilities and interests "just kind of snowballed from there." At the time, they were living in Oregon, so she and Jim joined a local art group in West Linn. They also entered some festivals and county fairs. Jim, known for his woodcarving and Annie, heavily into drawing and painting, won their share of blue ribbons.

## Advice to procrastinators

Here on the peninsula, with its active art community, Unwin often hears people talk about trying to muster the courage to "do art." Some, she said, shyly announce that they can't even draw a stick figure. "I tell them it doesn't matter. Everybody starts from the beginning. Very few people are born on this planet with an inert ability to create art work. It comes through learning."

When Unwin started taking all those classes in 1990, she said, "I was like a sponge. I just soaked up everything that I could get my hands on."



**9-1-WHAT?**  
THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

# Flashing

So it's a Saturday night in Warrenton and you have nothing to do. Please do not consider standing on a corner flashing drivers. We all thank you in advance.

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at [www.twitter.com/9\\_1\\_WHAT](http://www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT).

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{2/6 @ 9:47 a.m.} Chicken located and taken home. #Seaside

7:54 AM - 9 Feb 2016

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{2/6 @ 12:38 p.m.} Man in a tan windbreaker came into caller's yard, then the neighbor's yard and started playing basketball. #Warrenton

7:57 AM - 9 Feb 2016

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{2/7 @ 10:13 a.m.} Someone shooting a shotgun at ducks toward caller's property. Person contacted, shooting in a safe direction. #Warrenton

7:58 AM - 9 Feb 2016

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{2/6 @ 11:26 p.m.} Someone flashing drivers the corner. #Warrenton

7:58 AM - 9 Feb 2016

Folio

9-1-WHAT? [Following](#)

{2/7 @ 2:39 p.m.} Argument started over someone parking without a handicapped sticker. The person did have a handicapped sticker. #Seaside

7:59 AM - 9 Feb 2016

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