

URBAN LARSSON

Painting from Life



Hans Croiset posing in studio on Prinseneiland, March 2014

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Woman with Red Hat (Detail), 2012, Oil on canvas, 55 x 45 cm.,
Artist's collection, The Netherlands

Urban Larsson's Portraits

Sabine Craft-Giepmans

*'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.'*¹



Fig. 1
Urban Larsson, *Portrait of Mayor Schoute*, 1999, Oil on canvas
100 x 80 cm., Stadhuis De Paauw, Wassenaar

According to the *Haagse Courant*, on the evening of the 12th of January 2000, the portrait of departing Mayor Piet Heijn Schoute (1942-2015) was unveiled during an exceptional council meeting.² The town council had given Urban Larsson an assignment to paint Schoute's portrait, and according to tradition his picture was added to the gallery of Wassenaar mayor portraits in the De Paauw town hall (fig. 1). The majority of the series consists of mayors that led Wassenaar since 1911, and were painted by the famous Wassenaar portrait painter Sierk Schröder (1903-2002). Schröder worked from life, allowing him to convey the finest nuances of the human countenance. About this he said: 'redesigning nature in a recognizable manner, through which a faithful representation of a form or human figure reflects the inner self, is essential for me.'³ The starting point for both Larsson and Schröder is a serious visual study of nature: looking and truthful representation. Both share a love for the old masters, each explicitly naming Velázquez (1599-1660) as a source of inspiration.⁴ Nevertheless differences in their execution are evident: Larsson builds his paintings up in layers while Schröder works quickly and favours the 'wet in wet' technique. Here their training plays an important role. Schröder developed his style into that of a naturalistic, figurative artist after a modern academic study period in Paris in the 1920's. Larsson meanwhile was searching from the beginning for traditional painting methods.

COMMISSIONS

In the second half of the 20th century, Schröder developed into one of the most appreciated and in demand portrait painters in the Netherlands, a role now effectively assigned to Larsson. This is due not only to the quality of his work, but also the ever-increasing demand for Larsson's portraits. During the first years of his career, commissions were generally of people who were part of his extended natural network, but later Larsson's work gained publicity and appreciation in such a way that orders began to come from outside this circle.

Success can however not be measured only in terms of quantity. It is also the nature of the commission that plays an important role in testing the merit of a portrait painter. The number of public com-

missions is a good indicator, and the societal role of the sitter also plays an important role. In Larsson's work a powerful development can be discerned since the 1990s when he portrayed, alongside various private commissions, the aforementioned Mayor Schoute, Prof. Dr. Piet Drenth, the former president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Mgr. Teunis Johannes Horstman, Bishop of Haarlem. It is worth mentioning that the public portrait commissions are only given for appropriate occasions: a farewell, such as the Mayor and the President of the KNAW, or the celebration of a 10-year jubilee for the Bishop. In the ensuing years Larsson was asked to paint portraits for the retirement of various figures of significance. Individuals such as former Prime Minister Wim Kok (fig. 2), Chamber President Gerdi Verbeet (fig. 3), and in 2012 the Former Director of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) Prof. Dr. Rudi Ekkart (p. 70). In his native Sweden the appreciation of Larsson's work has proved to be so substantial that in 2013 he was asked to create a state portrait on the occasion of Queen Silvia's 70th birthday (p. 6). His most recent large public



Fig. 2
Urban Larsson, *Portrait of Former Prime Minister Wim Kok*, 2002, Oil on canvas, 47 x 37 cm., Ministry of General Affairs



Fig. 3
Urban Larsson, *Portrait of Gerdi Verbeet*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 110 x 80 cm., House of Representatives

commissions consist of two impressive life-size full-length portraits of King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima for Sociëteit de Witte in The Hague (figs. 4 & 5).

EDUCATION

Larsson is not led by trends and has developed a recognisable signature style. Solid foundations for the use of traditional painting techniques and realistic execution were laid during his three-year education at Studio Cecil & Graves in Florence.⁵ This historic studio is situated in the old cloister complex Monastero dell' Arcangelo Raffaello on Borgo San Frediano. It was established by the Florentine sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini (1777-1850), and subsequently passed to his assistant Pasquale Romanelli (1812-1887) in the middle of the 19th century. The teaching methods at Cecil & Graves were comparable to those of the painting academies and independent studios in Paris in the second half of the 19th century.⁶ They were based on traditional studio practices that had been passed from generation to



Fig. 4
Urban Larsson, *Portrait of King Willem-Alexander*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 220 x 135 cm., Sociëteit de Witte, The Hague



Fig. 5
Urban Larsson, *Portrait of Queen Maxima*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 220 x 135 cm., Sociëteit de Witte, The Hague

generation, as typified by the American artist John Singer Sargent who studied at the Paris atelier of M. Carolus-Duran. Charles Cecil (b. 1945), founder of the Charles H. Cecil Studios, has been teaching in Florence since 1983. He studied with R. H. Ives Gammell (1893-1981) of Boston, who had in turn studied portrait painting with William McGregor Paxton (1929-1941). The Boston artists were in close contact with European portrait practice through Sargent, who was a regular visitor.⁷ The sight-size method was historically used for portrait painting. It is based on a considered relative positioning of the model, artist and canvas, whereby the artist stands back from the easel so that the drawing or painting appears the same

size as the subject when viewed together from a specific distance.

The process is labour intensive and dynamic. The painter walks continuously back and forth between his easel and the position from which he studies the model to consider his progress on the canvas alongside nature. When the model is seated, the chair is placed on a podium so that the model is at eye level with the standing painter. The position of the model or podium is indicated on the floor so that for every sitting the starting point is the same. For followers of this tradition, even in the current age of digital photography, painting is done exclusively from a live model.

PRACTICE

In 2012, Rudi Ekkart posed for approximately 3 hours a day for 13 days in Larsson's studio (fig. 6). A world famous portrait specialist who sits as a model is an interesting assignment for a painter.⁸ Together they searched for the best pose, whereby Ekkart appeared relaxed and natural.⁹ Despite the classical music from the radio and good coffee it was no easy task for an active man, rather these were frozen moments in a busy life. Ekkart was fascinated by the activity of the painter. For him there ensued a continuous spectacle of quiet distancing and looking, followed by approaching the canvas rapidly with the brush ready for the next stroke. Especially striking was the attention for the correct brush: in some sessions up to fifteen different types were used. When Larsson was not working on the face they spoke about the history of portraiture and the artistic canon, Larsson's prime examples being Sargent, Van Dyck and Velázquez. According to Ekkart, Larsson was especially strict in his aim to paint as much as possible during their posing sessions. Because of time constraints, a model with a similar physique posed for the completion of the tie and the booklet Ekkart has in his hand. The items were left in the studio for this purpose.

TRADITION

Larsson is an eminent representative of sight-size portraiture (for the definitive guide, see 'On Sight-size Portraiture' by Nicholas Beer).¹⁰ Although portraits by masters such as Titiaan, Frans Hals and Velázquez only come into their proper focus when seen from the correct distance, there are only a few written sources that document the working process of placing the model alongside the canvas. In the 1743 English translation of Roger de Piles' *Cours de Peinture par Principes* (1708), he states in the chapter *Of Practice in Portraiture* that it is advisable to compare the painting and the model to each other from some distance in order to properly assess if 'there is anything still wanting to perfect the work.'¹¹ Especially if the figures are depicted life-sized, it is difficult to take in the total effect of a painting from close up. De Piles here added that only someone knowledgeable can enjoy a portrait from up close; an inexperienced viewer can understand it only from a distance.¹²

Possibly of greater importance for the development of English portrait painting in the 18th century was the publication of *An account of the lives and works of the most eminent Spanish painters*, published in 1739. This book was in part based on the 17th century Spanish artists biographies by Palomino de Castro y Valasco, in which was written about the life of Velazquez: 'He did it with Pencils and Brushes which had extreme long Handles which he sometimes made use of to paint at a greater Distance, and more Boldness: so that near-hand, one does not know what to make of it: but far off, it is a Master-piece.'¹³ In 18th century England, Velázquez's paintings were increasingly admired. The essence of this apprecia-

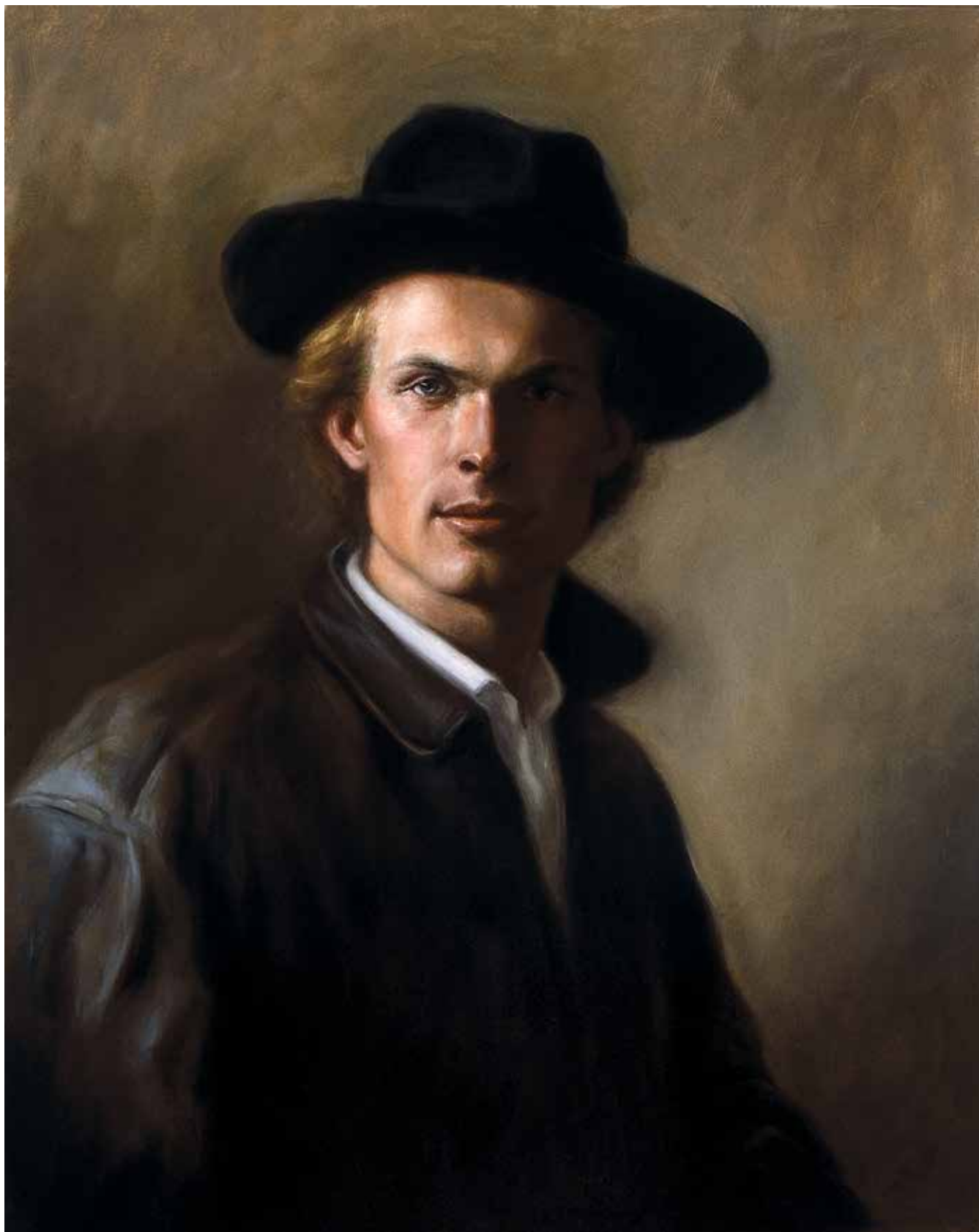


Fig. 6
Rudi Ekkart posing in the studio on Prinseneiland, spring 2012

tion focused on the visual effect, which manifests itself when contemplating his portraits from a distance. Generations of successful British portrait painters allowed themselves to be inspired by him.¹⁴ Sir Joshua Reynolds, painter and first President of the Royal Academy in London, even considered his work 'the closest to truth of any work he had seen.' In order to better understand his technique Reynolds literally dissected a work by Velázquez by scratching off the paint layers and building it up again himself.¹⁵ Reynolds developed and used a painting method, documented in writing, which defines sight-size. He advised his students to place the canvas next to the model and to work from as far away as possible. [16] A very active process ensued. '... he took quite a quantity of exercise while he painted, for he continually walked backward and forward. His plan was to walk away several feet, then take a long look at me and the picture as we stood side by side, then rush up to the portrait and dash it in a kind of fury. I sometimes thought that he would make a mistake, and paint on me instead of the picture.'¹⁷ Reynolds was obviously not alone in his painting practice. In a memorial note after the death of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), Reynolds wrote 'all those odd scratches and marks seem, by a kind of magic, at a certain distance, to drop into their proper places.'¹⁸

That portrait painters deliberately created physical distance between themselves and their model during painting is evidenced by testimonials of different modeling sessions. Such as this of Henry Raeburn (1756-1823): 'placing his sitter on the pedestal, he looked at him from the other end of a long room ... Having got the idea of the man ... he walked hastily up to the canvas ... and put down what he had fixed with his inner eye'. Or by Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830):¹⁹ 'His picture and his sitter were placed at a distance from the point of view, where to see both at a time, he had to traverse all across the room ... each travers allowing time for inven-

Paintings by Urban Larsson



Self-Portrait with hat, 1991, Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Rocks with trees at Arco Naturale, Capri, Italy, 1999, Oil on paper/maroufle, 21 x 33 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



View near le Corti, Tuscany, 2000, Oil on canvas/maroufle, 30 x 50 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



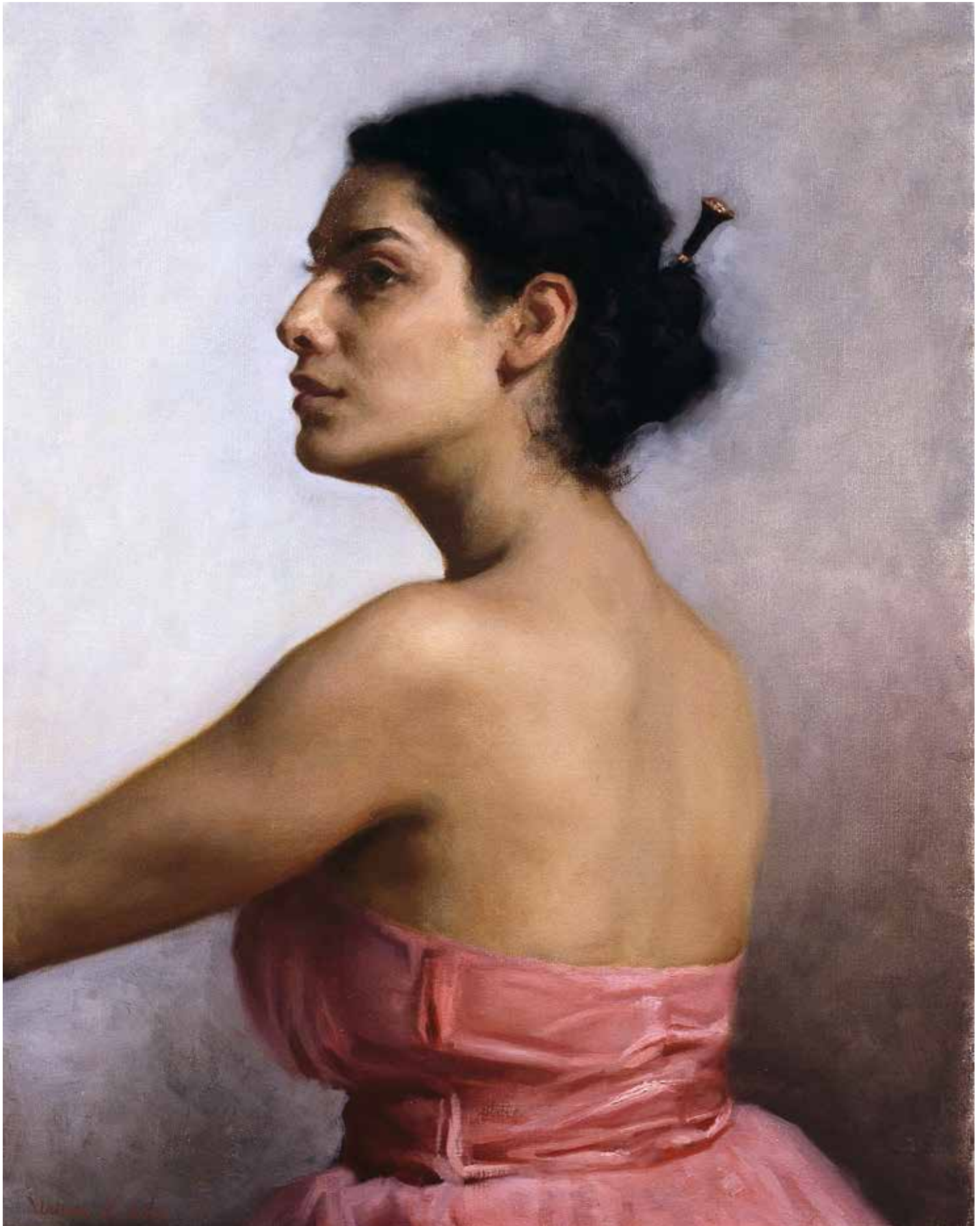
Portrait of Marion van der Mast, 2001, Oil on canvas, 150 x 75 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands,



Portrait of Mr W. Kok, Minister of State, Former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, 2002, Oil on canvas, 47 x 37 cm., Ministry of General Affairs, The Hague, The Netherlands



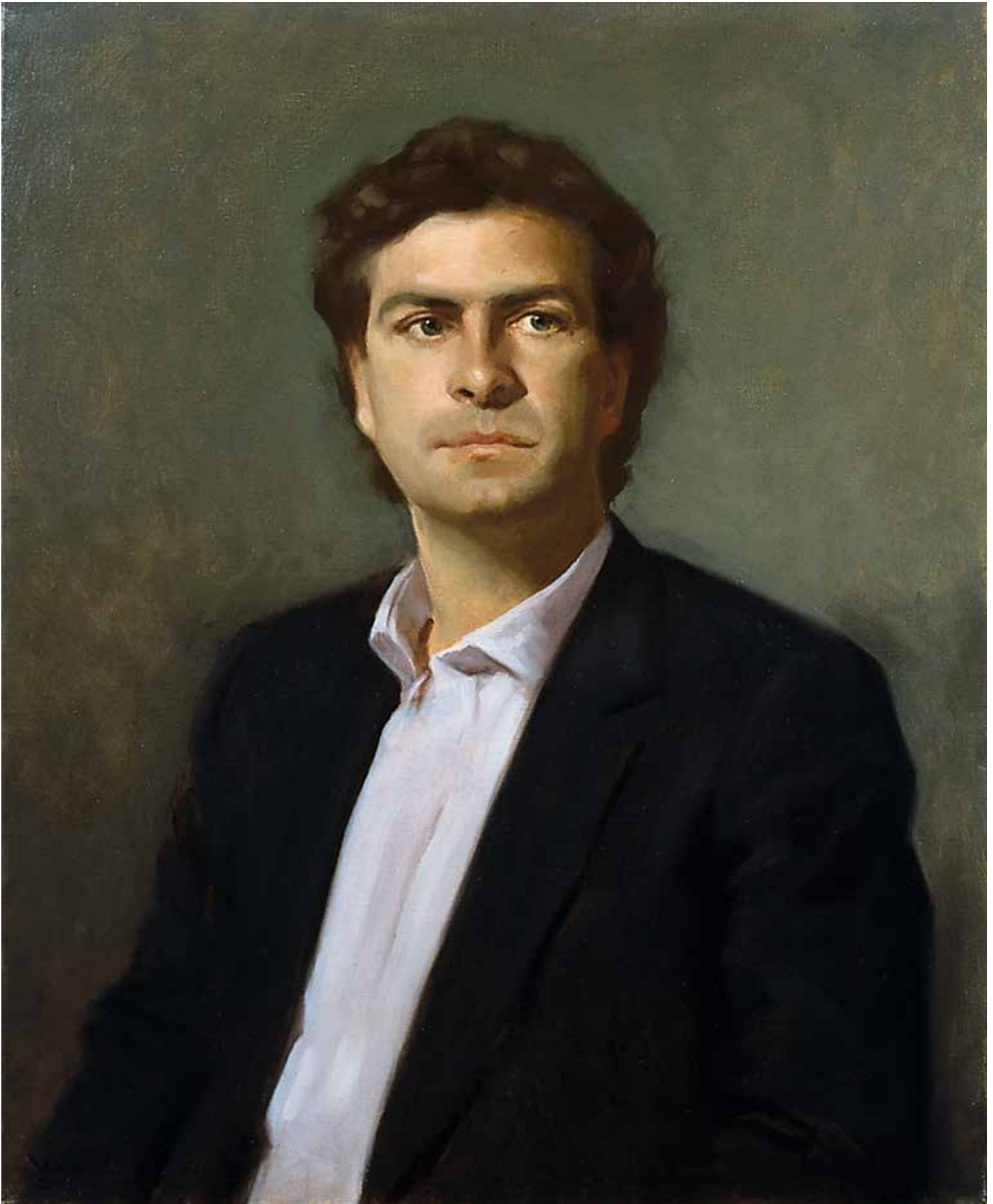
Portrait of Ineke Stevens, 2002, Oil on canvas, 125 x 70 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands



Woman in Pink dress, 2002, Oil on canvas, 70 x 55 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Standing Woman with Kimono, 2003, Oil on canvas, 105 x 80 cm., Private collection, U.S.A.



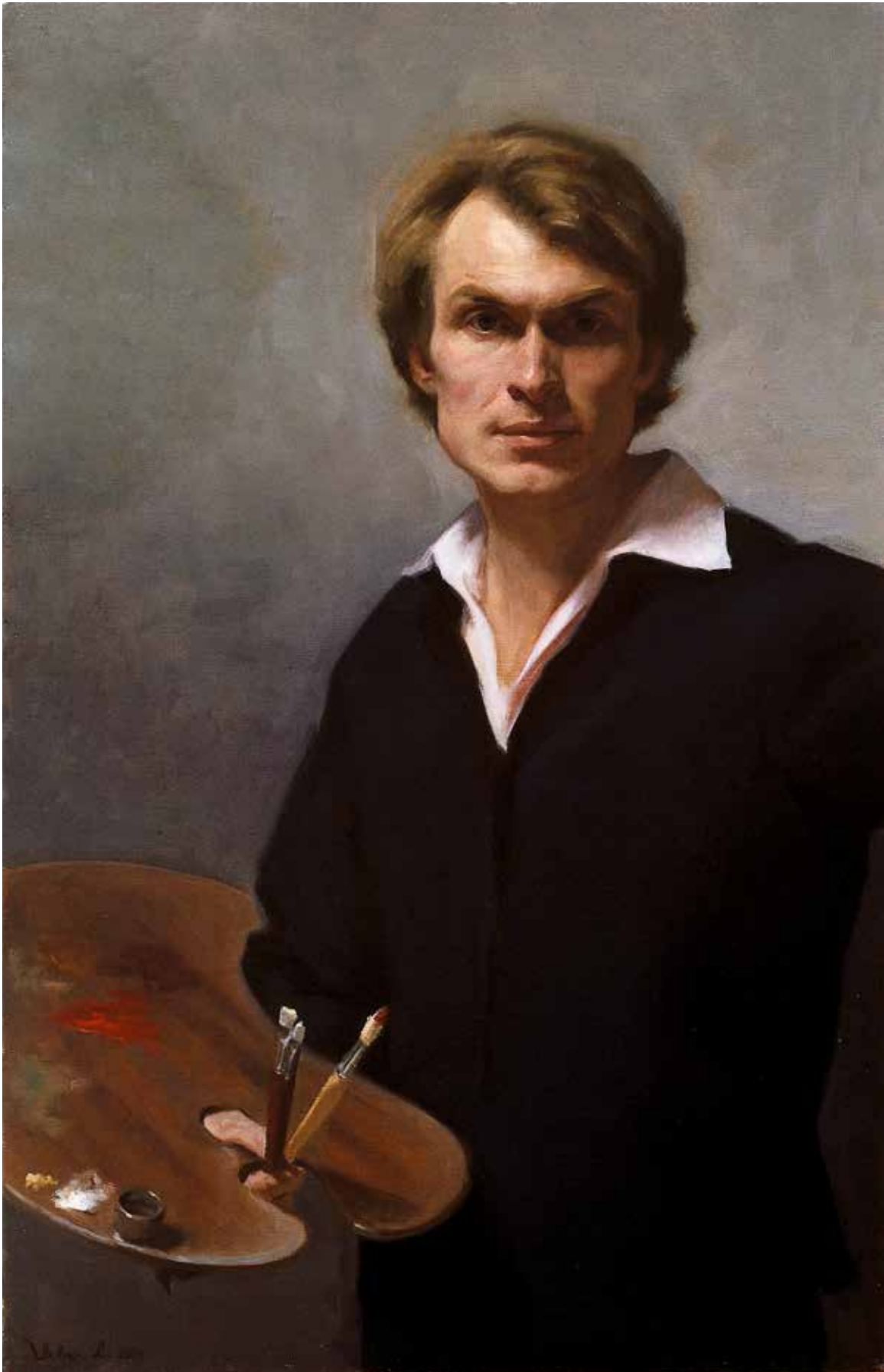
Portrait of Alexander R.T. Odle, 2003, Oil on canvas, 70 x 65 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands



Still-life with pears and wine, 2003, Oil on canvas, 30 x 70 cm., Private collection, U.K.



View of Lane with Trees, Nederhemert-zuid, The Netherlands, 2003, Oil on canvas/maroufle, 20 x 40 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands



Self-portrait with Palette, 2004, Oil on canvas, 85 x 55 cm., Private collection, Sweden



Woman in Chair, 2004, Oil on canvas, 70 x 55 cm., Private collection, U.S.A.



Portrait of Noah Larsson (Artist's Oldest Daughter), 2005, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Woman in White, 2005, Oil on canvas, 90 x 65 cm., Private collection, Sweden



Woman in Chair, 2006, Oil on canvas, 95 x 75 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Woman Seated with Kimono, 2006, Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands



Still-life Flowers, 2009, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm., Private collection, Germany



Portrait of the Former President of the House of Representatives of the States General, The Netherlands Mrs. Gerdi Verbeet, 2010, Oil on canvas, 110 x 80 cm., House of Representatives, The Hague, The Netherlands



Woman from back with Red and White, 2014, Oil on canvas, 95 x 75 cm., Private collection, Sweden



Still-life with Pomegranates, Melon, Vase and Wine, 2014, Oil on canvas, 40 x 58 cm., Private collection, Sweden



Portrait of H.M. King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, 2016, oil on canvas, 220 x 135 cm., Sociëteit de Witte, The Hague, The Netherlands (Photo Margareta Svensson)



Portrait of H.M. Queen Maxima of the Netherlands, 2016, oil on canvas, 220 x 135 cm., Sociëteit de Witte, The Hague, The Netherlands (Photo Margareta Svensson)



Indian Woman, 2016, Oil on canvas, 65 x 40 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Woman (Eve), 2016, Oil on canvas, 160 x 125 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



View of Roch S. Christoph, Dentelles, Provence (evening), 2016, Oil on canvas/maroufle, 30 x 45 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



View of Dentelles near Chateau Redortier, Provence, 2016, Oil on canvas, 50 x 80 cm., Private collection, The Netherlands



View near Chateau Redortier, Dentelles, Provence, 2016, Oil on canvas/maroufle, 25 x 40 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



View from Domaine Durban, Dentelles, Provence (morning), 2016, Oil on canvas, 40 x 65 cm., Artist's collection, The Netherlands



Educated in Florence, Italy, the Swedish born artist Urban Larsson (b. 1966) moved to Amsterdam in 1991. Since 2007 he has worked in the former studio of George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923) on Prinseneiland, Amsterdam.

Urban is a contemporary artist, only working from life, whose work process and visual philosophy draws upon the painting traditions of the past. The majority of his portraits, landscapes and still lifes can be found in private collections in Europe and the U.S.A. His prestigious portrait commissions have brought him international acclaim.

The present catalogue gives an overview of his oeuvre while the art historical essay by Sabine E. Craft-Giepmans and interview by Edwin Becker, place the paintings of Urban Larsson in a time and context.

