

Fabian Bachrach: AMERICAN PORTRAITURE

by William F. Schulz

The name "Bachrach" is indelibly associated in the public mind with portrait photography of the highest quality. Indeed, for 125 years it has been a *sine qua non* of celebrityhood that one have one's portrait done under the Bachrach label. Every United States President since Andrew Johnson has sat for a Bachrach photograph and still today public figures from Meryl Streep to Colin Powell include a stop at Bachrach Studios among their most important appointments. How did it all begin? What was the secret of success? And what was there to learn about the Great and Famous in the intimacy of a photography studio?

When I heard that Fabian Bachrach, the current *paterfamilias* of the clan, was a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, having attended First Unitarian Society in Newton since childhood, I determined to find out. We met in my office at UUA headquarters, Mr. Bachrach declaring his own office too much of a mess to receive me: "We're putting together a history of the business called *Photographed by Bachrach: 125 Years of American Portraiture* [Rizzoli 1992]," he said. "Photos scattered everywhere!" We began by talking of the origins of that business.

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photographed in a way that's flattering or dynamic or beautiful or whatever.

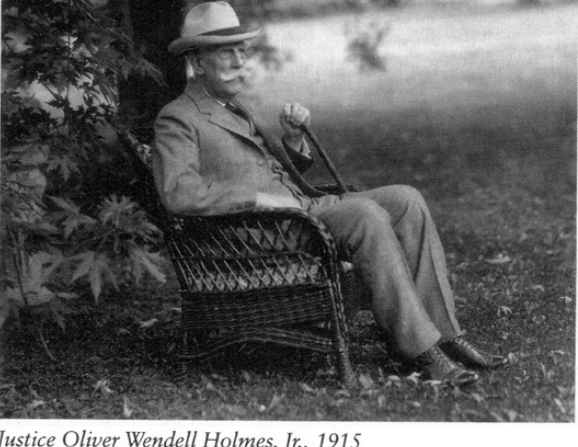
For example, take my father's picture of Eleanor Roosevelt. He wrote Eleanor Roosevelt when she was in the White House that he'd seen literally hundreds of pictures of her in the newspaper and they were all terrible.

Schulz: He wrote that to her?

Bachrach: Well, not in those words. But what he said was, "I went to a lecture recently where I saw you in animated poses and it made me realize that, if we can capture that spirit in you, then we can present you the way the world wants to think of you." So he asked to come to the White House and make some pictures that would do her justice. She said sure. So he went down and she had just come in that day from a horseback riding trip and he made some pictures of her in her riding uniform on the back porch of the White House. They're great pictures! Then he made some in a formal gown in one of the public rooms of the White House standing in front of a portrait of General Grant. The problem was to get her animated; you had to have her smiling and then she was terrific looking: dynamic and charming and graceful and alive. And that's what we try to do with everybody.

Schulz: Capture that special quality in each of us.

Bachrach: That's right and combine it with clever lighting and shadow and the better side of a person's face. To start out with, you want to place the person in three-dimensional form. You do that by the relationship of the color and value of the background to the figure and face. That way you establish the sense of three-dimensional distance in the portrait.



Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1915

Bill Schulz: Tell me how it started.

Fabian Bachrach: Well, my grandfather picked up where Matthew Brady [the great Civil War photographer] left off. Brady, you see, died a pauper. He had had a very successful studio on Broadway in New York before the Civil War—one of the first things King Edward VII did when he stepped on the American shore was go to Brady's studio—but, when the war came, he dropped everything and just followed the troops. When he came back after the war, his business was shot.

Schulz: Did your grandfather work with Brady?

Bachrach: No, grandfather lived in Baltimore but he also took army pictures, civil war pictures, and when he was a young apprentice, an assistant to a photographer for *Leslie's Weekly*, he was asked to go down to a place called Gettysburg. Lincoln was speaking and we have some of his pictures of the crowds from there.

Schulz: So your grandfather took pictures of Lincoln at Gettysburg?

Bachrach: No. Well, yes, I guess you could say he did... but Lincoln was this tall [indicating about one eighth of an inch] and there were about fifty other people up there on the platform!

Schulz: So your grandfather started his own business...

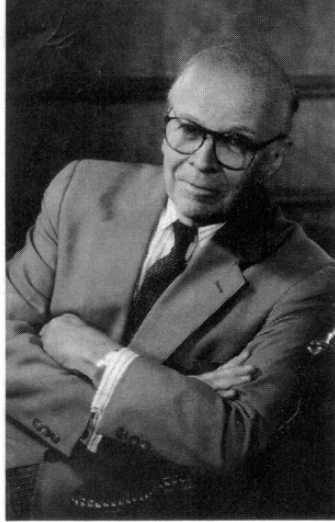
Bachrach: In 1868 in Baltimore. It gradually grew and when my father and my uncle reached their maturity, they didn't know what to do with themselves so they went into the business too.

The same thing happened with me. When I got out of the Navy after World War II, I thought I wanted to be a ceramic engineer. I told my father I didn't want to go into the business; I didn't think it was interesting. Well, my father had never put any pressure on me but he wrote me a beautiful letter in which he questioned the idea that the business wasn't interesting and assured me that there would be plenty of challenges.

So I said, "OK, I'll tell you what. I'll go into the business for one year but don't tell me what to do. I want to work in all the departments and then I'll decide." So I learned how to re-touch, how to print, how to take pictures, how to sell and at the end of the year, sure enough, I was interested and decided to stay in.

Schulz: Now over all these years—your grandfather, father—what do you think it was that made Bachrach stand out?

Bachrach: Well, I think we've always felt that people want more than just a map of their face. They want portraits—particularly at special times in their lives—which show them at their best and show their character to the world. So from my grandpa David's time we've always assumed that everybody who comes into our studio can be



L. Fabian Bachrach, Jr.



Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House, 1939

ALL PHOTOS BY FABIAN BACHRACH

Another part of the equation is the clever use of light and shadows. The shadow is just as important as the highlights. So you mold the face by the way you place the main light. And of course there's the question of pose. That's not simple. I've studied it all my life.

Many people have terrible pictures taken of them and they finally throw up their hands and come to us and say, "If Bachrach can't do anything for me, nobody can!" So part of our success is our reputation built up over decades.

Schulz: Now what makes for an easy subject or a difficult one?

Bachrach: The hardest people to photograph are psychiatrists!

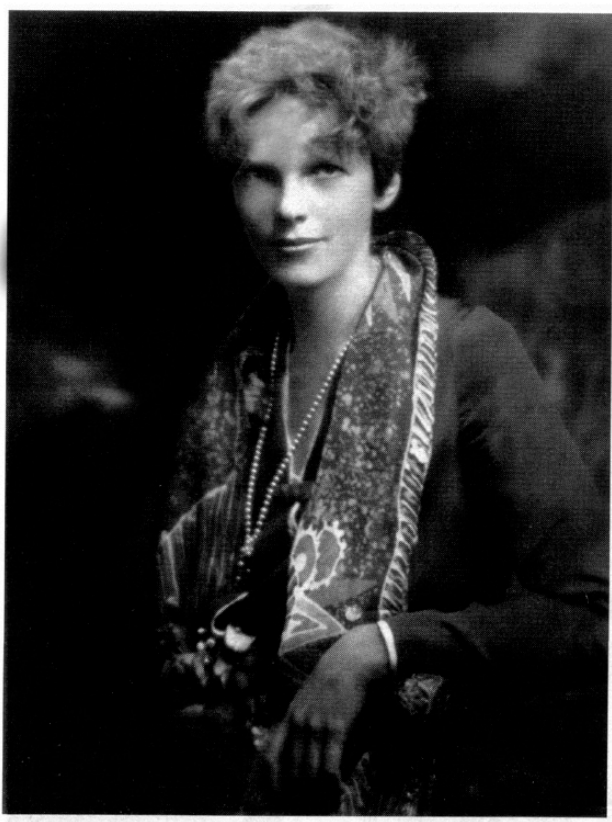
Schulz: Psychiatrists! Why's that?

Bachrach: Because they're always trying to figure out what you're trying to do! They don't trust the photographer. "I don't look that way. That's not me." Believe me, I feel like saying, "For God's sake, just let me take the pictures, will you? Assume that I know what I'm doing and just relax!" They're extremely difficult.

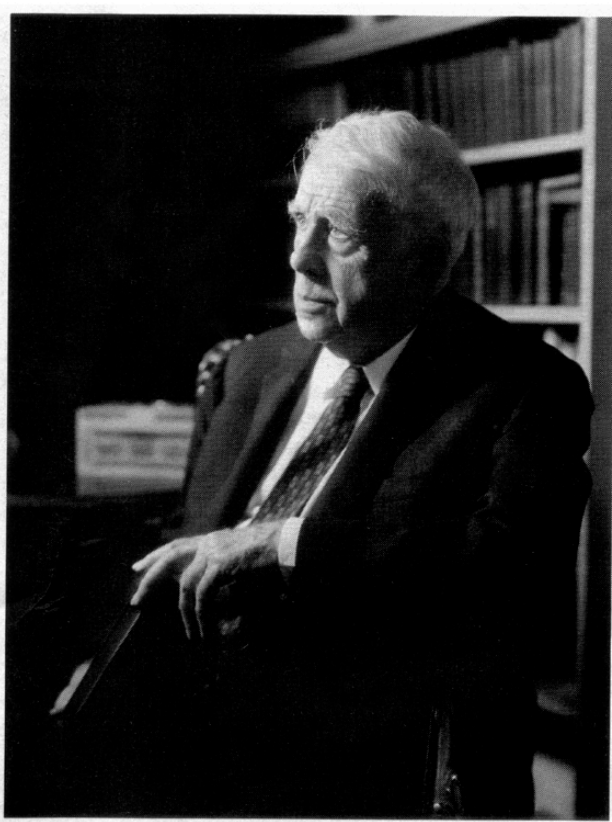
The easiest people to photograph are ministers.

Schulz: Why do you suppose that is?

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Amelia Earhart, 1930. Since the 19th century, the Bachrachs have photographed some of the world's best-known celebrities.



Robert Frost, 1959

Bachrach: Because they're used to being on stage! They know how to put one hand on their lapel and one hand on the Bible. They know all the poses. You don't have to tell them. They're like actors though actors and actresses are not easy because they overact.

Schulz: So tell me who some of the most interesting people are whom you've photographed over the years.

Bachrach: Well, one of the most interesting was Baby Doc Duvalier of Haiti. Some of our best customers have been scoundrels, you know.

Schulz: How did that assignment come about?

Bachrach: Well, they were building a new art museum in Port-au-Prince and they wanted a life-sized portrait of Baby Doc. We went down to Haiti and sat and cooled our heels for three days until he was ready. We went to the Governor's Palace and I'd been told [Baby Doc] spoke English but he didn't and my French was lousy so I spoke Italian to him which he thought was very funny so we got along fine. Later they ordered thousands and thousands of photographs.



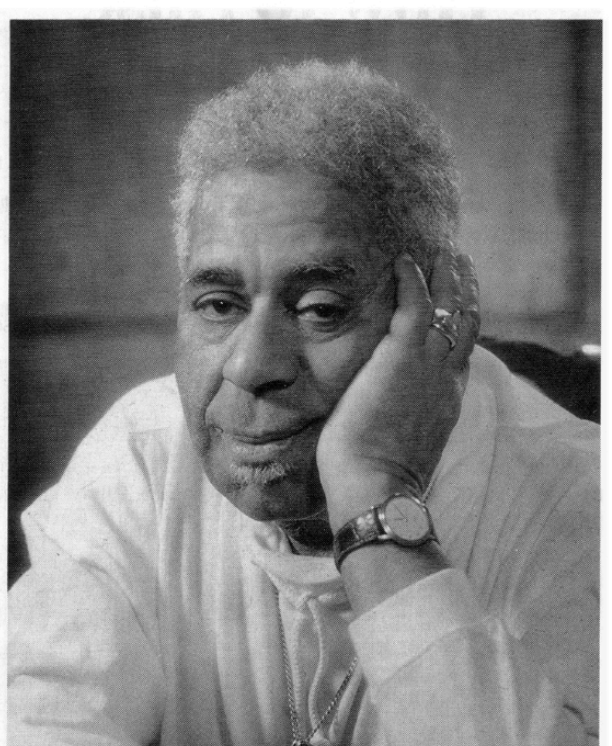
Pearl Bailey, 1985. According to Robert Bachrach, she "was not poseable—she had to be caught in action—a feat not possible without strobe lighting and very fast film."

But here's the catch. When his representative came up to New York to pay for the prints and pick them up, he said,

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Billie Burke, 1943. In the 1940s, Bachrach photographers posed their subjects in the glamorous styles of the era.



Dizzy Gillespie, 1990

"Gee, I made a mistake. I made the check out for too much money. Could you give me a check for \$10,000 refund?" So we had to give him \$10,000—that was his way of getting money out of the deal. It went straight into his own pocket. See how crooked that thing was? But what could we do? We couldn't prove a thing.

Schulz: Any other scoundrels?

Bachrach: Well, the Shah of Iran. Only I guess at the time we photographed him, he wasn't considered a scoundrel but a great friend of the United States. And then there was Somoza of Nicaragua. He came up to us. You could tell he was a big, blustering bully. But the interesting thing was that he was having his picture taken with his wife and she kept him waiting for an hour and a half but, when she finally arrived, he was just like a puppy dog, this big dictator. Only trouble with Somoza was we had a hell of a time collecting the fee!

Schulz: And what about US Presidents? I guess I won't categorize them as scoundrels.

Bachrach: Well, we've photographed every President since [Andrew] Johnson and we can't afford not to get one now.

Schulz: Do any of them resist you?

Bachrach: Oh, yes. It's not easy to get them. In the case of Reagan, for instance, a couple of years went by and finally we had to appeal to Tip O'Neill who obviously met with the President regularly. So Tip probably said, "Look, Mr. President. Bachrach's a great outfit. Let them do your picture." So we did it and Reagan was an actor so he was very graceful. Tall and thin and slim and extremely graceful.

Though I got the feeling that right after we got through photographing him, it was time for his nap.

Schulz: You'd worn him out?

Bachrach: He didn't work that hard anyway.

Schulz: Thanks so much for your reminiscences. They've been delightful. Let's conclude by talking about your Unitarian Universalist connections.

Bachrach: Well, I grew up in the West Newton church but it was really my wife—she was a Presbyterian who couldn't accept the doctrine of predestination—who became enamored of the Unitarian [Universalist] church. As an adult, I got involved through her enthusiasm. My first mistake was to sing in the choir. If I'm going to go to church, I'd rather sing than do anything else.

Schulz: And are you still active?

Bachrach: No, I'm not very active now. After I'd sung in the choir awhile, they asked me to serve on the Board of Trustees and, geez, before you knew it, I was chair of the board. I did that four terms. It was a great experience—I loved it—but it was a thankless job.

Schulz: But you still consider yourself Unitarian Universalist?

Bachrach: Oh, yes, I guess so. After all, what else would I be? □

William F. Schulz is president of the Unitarian Universalist Association.