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# Cultural Daily

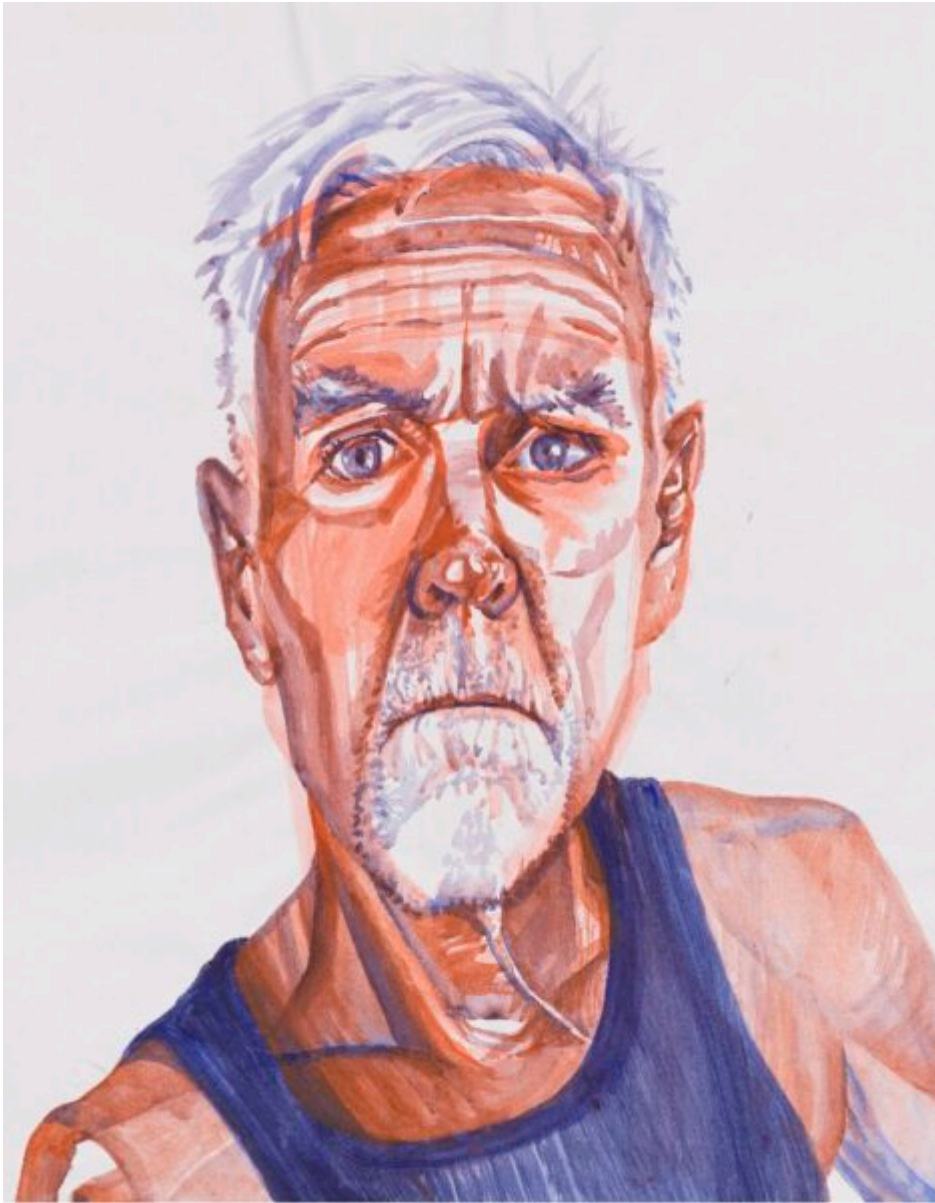
Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Starstruck in Hollywood: Don Bachardy Portraits

Stephen West · Friday, April 18th, 2025

Don Bachardy, a prolific artist who made thousands of drawings of his friends and acquaintances in Southern California, is the subject of a major retrospective at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, now rebranded simply as The Huntington.

The show, *Don Bachardy: A Life in Portraits*, features more than 100 works, in pencil or acrylic color on paper, each completed in just one day. They cover a wide range of subjects, including writers, artists, musicians, and actors in the circle of Bachardy's longtime partner, the British-American novelist and playwright Christopher Isherwood. There are portraits of writers such as James Baldwin and Truman Capote, movie stars including Bette Davis, and L.A. artists such as David Hockney and Billy Al Bengston.



Don Bachardy, *Self-portrait 08-08-18*, 2018, acrylic on paper; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington, © Don Bachardy, 2018.

One of the strongest works in the exhibition, a self-portrait from 2018, shows Bachardy at age 84 — serious, focused, perhaps a bit anxious. Unlike many of the black-and-white drawings on view, this one in acrylic is fully finished, balancing the white of his hair and beard with the orange-tan of his skin and the deep blue of his sleeveless shirt. It's a powerful image of the realities of old age.

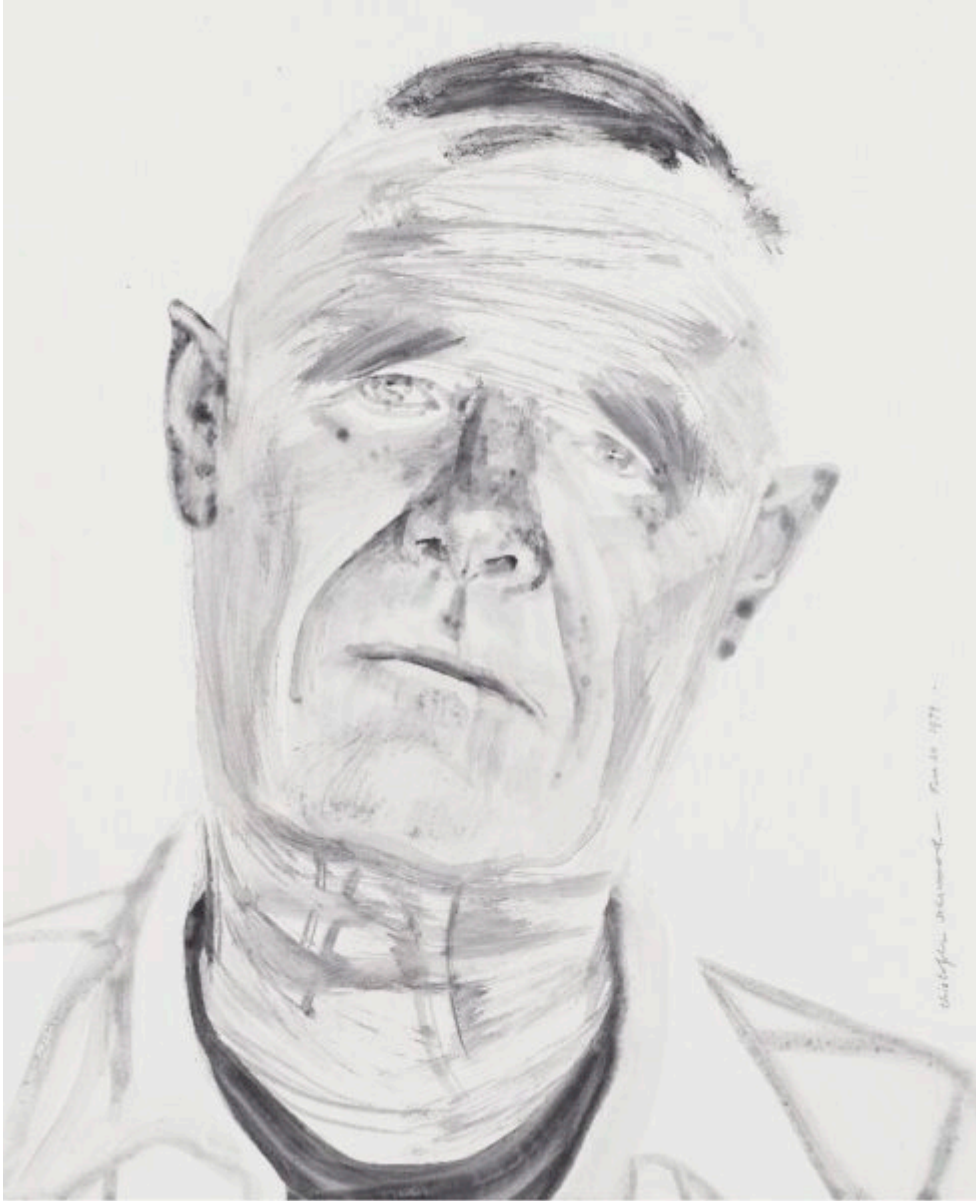
Bachardy was born in 1934, grew up in Los Angeles, and was smitten by Hollywood glamour at an early age. His mother drove Don and his brother Ted to movie openings, where they would stand outside the theater in hopes of taking photographs of the stars and sometimes slipping into the premiere.



Ted Bachardy, *Don and Marilyn Monroe*, 1952, photograph; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington.

Visitors to the exhibition are greeted at the entrance by a small black-and-white photograph, taken by Ted, of Don getting an autograph from Marilyn Monroe in front of a theater (top image and above). Don, 18 and dressed in a coat and tie, looks thrilled. Marilyn, in a low-cut satin dress, displays a slightly forced smile for the occasion. It clearly shows how Don was starstruck over Hollywood at a very young age.

At about this time, in 1952, Don met Christopher Isherwood and began a lifelong relationship. Though Isherwood was best known for his novels and stories — including 1939's *Goodbye to Berlin*, the inspiration for the hit 1972 film *Cabaret* — he was writing scripts in Hollywood at the time. The couple lived together in Isherwood's house in Santa Monica until his death in 1986, and Bachardy continues to live there.



Don Bachardy, *Isherwood, Christopher 06-20-79*, 1979, acrylic on paper; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington, © Don Bachardy, 1979.

A portrait of Isherwood from 1979, in black acrylic paint on paper, shows Bachardy's ability to capture the essence of his subject with quick, loose brushstrokes. The framing around the face is tight, with just a bit of shirt collar and shoulders below. Isherwood tilts his head slightly while maintaining an unsmiling, quizzical expression.

Isherwood's dinner parties at his Santa Monica house functioned as a meeting place for the artistic, film, and literary elite of Southern California. They also functioned as a recruiting device for many subjects of Bachardy's portraits.

The portraits, in almost all cases, focus on the subject's face. Bachardy's ability to capture that face is what makes him a real artist. The catalog notes that he started a picture by focusing on the eyes and working out from there. With his self-imposed time constraint of completing a work in a single session, the subject's body is often barely sketched in. Still, this also explains how Bachardy was able to complete about 17,000 portraits in his career.



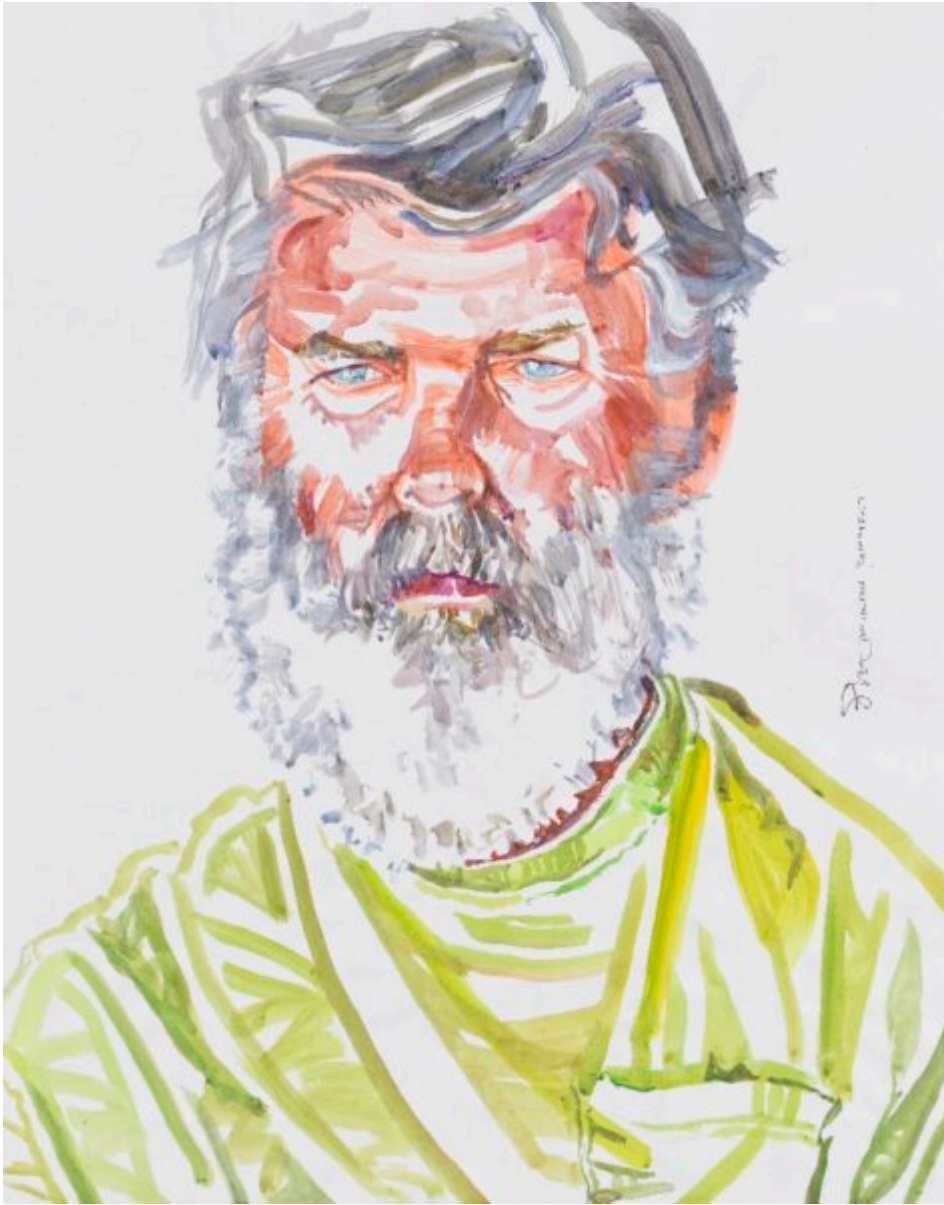
Don Bachardy, *Bette Davis*, 1973, graphite and ink on paper, Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington; © Don Bachardy, 1973.

Bette Davis, the essence of a Hollywood movie star, sat for Bachardy four times. One of the pencil-and-ink portraits — from 1973, when she was 65 — shows a fully detailed image of her head and a very sketchy outline of her torso. The hairdo is flawless and her expression is somber, almost gloomy. According to the exhibition catalog, her “verdict upon seeing Bachardy’s final portrait of her was withering in its praise: ‘Yup, that’s the old bag.’”



Don Bachardy, *Baldwin, James 01-23-64*, 1964, pencil and ink; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington, © Don Bachardy, 1964.

The writer James Baldwin gets similar treatment: a carefully worked-up face, with his right hand raised to touch his chin, and the rest of his shirt and tie barely sketched out below. Baldwin's expression, as in so many of Bachardy's portraits, is an ambiguous mix. In this case, Baldwin is slightly smiling as he looks off to the right, though we have no idea what provoked that mood.



Don Bachardy, Hilton, Tim 05-30-17, 2017, acrylic on paper; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington, © Don Bachardy, 2017.

After Isherwood's death in 1986, Bachardy began to use color much more in his works. One excellent example is his 2017 portrait of Tim Hilton, an art critic for the British newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. Like Bachardy's self-portrait from a year later, the work centers on Hilton's bright blue eyes staring straight back at the viewer. The rest of his face, as well as his hair and beard and shirt, are colorfully sketched in more broadly. It's a serious portrait of someone in the last decade of his life, someone who remains fully engaged with the world.

*Don Bachardy: A Life in Portraits* runs through August 4 at The Huntington, 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, California. Parents should be aware that the exhibition includes works with full-frontal nudity of both men and women. An extensive, full-color catalog of the exhibition is published by The Huntington.

*Top image: Ted Bachardy, Don and Marilyn Monroe, 1952, photograph; Don Bachardy Papers, The Huntington.*

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