



Professor Vilas Tonape is an internationally recognized artist and educator. A native of India, Tonape received his BFA from the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay and his MFA in Painting from Texas Christian University. Currently, he chairs the department of art at North Carolina's Methodist University, while holding an ongoing workshop series every summer in India. Recently, Professor Emeritus Jim Woodson—one of Tonape's "American Gurus"—recommended Tonape to an art lover who was interested in learning more about portraiture: This is how Tonape ended up in Dallas, art supplies in hand, ready to spend an afternoon with Laura and George W. Bush.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

Methodist University: Portraiture and a President

Gurus and the Gift of Knowledge

A guru, in the most general terms, is a darkness dispeller, an educator capable of guiding a willing learner to a place of self-awareness and enlightenment. While a teacher may guide a student in lessons and provide capable instruction, a guru helps students connect with something inside themselves.

Tonape notes that in life, there are three important entities: Parents, who gave life; God, who created the universe; and a Guru/Teacher, who can help others find their right path.

Inscribed on an Award of Appreciation plaque from Texas Christian University, a prized item that currently holds a place of honor in Tonape's office, is a phrase that highlights the unmatched relevance of that third entity: "The teacher is the one who has the facility to put you on the right path."

Raised and schooled in India, Tonape grew up viewing a Guru/Teacher as one deserving of the highest reverence. He also believes that a meaningful education is not something that can be purchased. The opportunities he was offered to work with teachers who became his gurus were not accidental or the whims of fate; instead, he argues, these were instances of good fortune where he was blessed.

He also stresses that knowledge is not something that can be bought or sold. In other words, it doesn't matter how much tuition is paid because, as Tonape explains, "Knowledge and wisdom can only be a gift."

Nathan Seay, a former student of Tonape's who now teaches in Portland, wrote to his mentor about the profound impact Tonape had on his art and his life, sharing how appreciative, humbled, inspired, and grateful he is to have worked with Tonape as his teacher.

Seay writes, "You once told me that the teacher's role is to simply remove the dust revealing the gold that is already there, but I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that if it were not for you, that gold would remain buried until the day I die."

A Teaching Junkie

Tonape, who calls himself a "teaching junkie," says he would give a class in the middle of a mall if the opportunity arose, and he's proven that claim to be true with his devotion to students in India and in the U.S.

His video series that shares invaluable techniques and lessons has inspired countless artists, and he is vigilant at maintaining learning communities, whether face-to-face or virtual.

ProfT was designed to offer art instruction to learners of all ages and provide consultation on artistic initiatives and art exhibitions. Their mission is to inspire and engage newcomers to art with an educational experience that is systematic and structured, and they are guided by the ideal that every student has a right to learn, as well as the right to a high-quality education. Currently—as they do each year since the group was formed—ProfT is offering a May and June 2018 series of lectures, workshops, and demonstrations in India.

Building Cross-Cultural Virtual Communities

He also found a way to broaden his reach using a social media platform. ProfT Studio Art Education, a facebook group, has nearly 14,000 members. Tonape uses the page to offer advice, share art, share demonstration videos, and interact with anyone who is devoted to learning more about the craft. The group is about sixty percent Indian students and forty percent American students, Tonape estimates.

Inside the ProfT Studio Art Education group, former and current students share their experiences with ProfT workshops and the impact those classes had on their lives.



Mahua Chakraborty notes that Professor Tonape is like a tree trunk, and his students are the branches of the tree. Neeta Deshpande adds that she feels blessed to have an opportunity to learn from Tonape, who she calls an energetic, down-to-earth, wonderful person who manages to charge everyone around him in a pool of energy.

Swapnil Darvandar comments that the word “guru” has a direct connection to so many of their hearts, and no one has made a stronger connection as a guru—someone who can lead others on a path towards their own success—than Tonape. Mithu Basu adds that Tonape’s observations of the art world, from the west where he lives and teaches and from India where he was raised and first developed as an artist, offer “gems of his accrued wisdom.”

An Artist, an American Guru, and an American President

Professor Jim Woodson, Professor Emeritus at Texas Christian University, was one of Tonape’s educators during his MFA studies and is one

As Tonape focused on capturing the first lady’s visage, President Bush would joke, “Oh, I wish you would finish that eye.” Eventually, the artist relaxed enough to offer retorts and engage in the fun. Noting that the professor is supposed to harass the students, not the other way around, Tonape told Bush, “You’re going to get a bill from the therapist.”

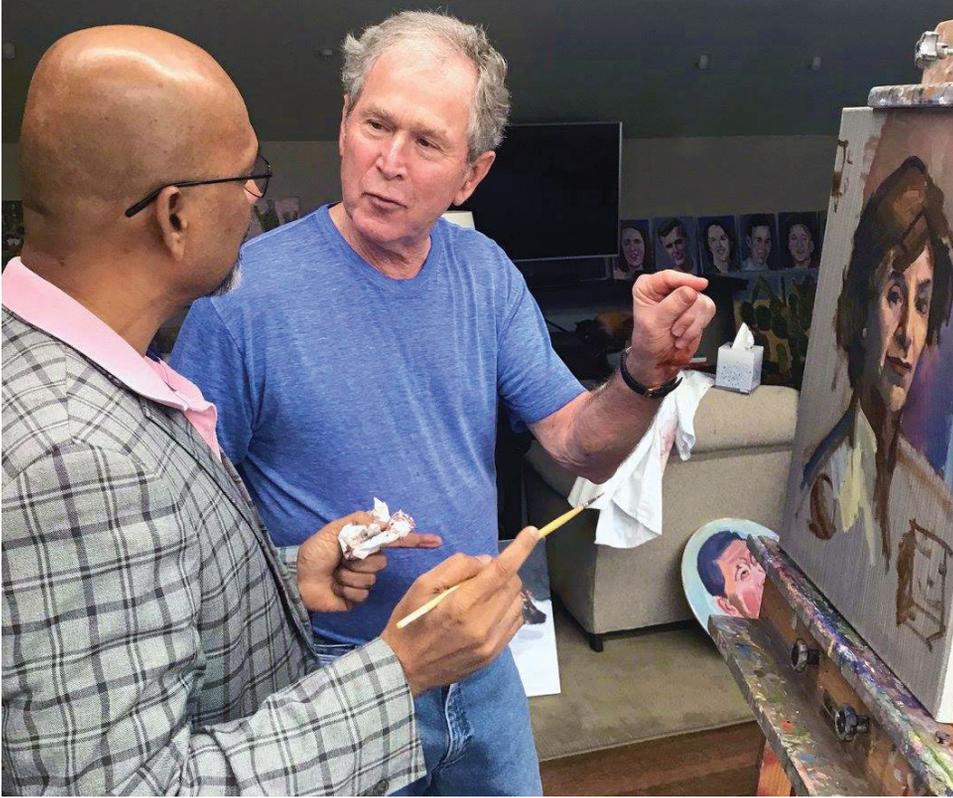
of Tonape’s two “American Gurus.” Woodson had worked with President George W. Bush on some of his projects before, so when Bush expressed a desire to learn more about portraiture, Woodson shared one of Tonape’s YouTube demonstrations with him.

When Woodson later called Tonape to see if he would like to visit with the Bushes at their

home in Dallas, the response was immediate: “Just say when and where. When and where is all you gotta say.”

A Monumental Moment

When President Bush came out to welcome his guest, Tonape’s first thought was, “Holy moly, he’s in shorts and a t-shirt.” Bush surprised



him when he took Tonape's box of art supplies to carry inside for him, an act that demonstrated both humility and kindness.

Admitting that he was never fully comfortable during the demonstration, Tonape would try to "focus on the teaching" in order to distract himself from the "magnitude of the event."

Adding even more significance to the moment was that Tonape's mentor was watching over his shoulder as he demonstrated his portraiture process to President Bush, and former first lady Laura Bush would be his subject.

Rightly intuiting that his former student was working to quell his nerves by putting on "his professorial cap" and slipping into the language of academia to focus his nervous energy, Woodson encouraged Tonape to just start painting and let President Bush watch him work.

Building a Face

Woodson explains that Tonape's training in India allows him to see how the structure

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works within a face, and he was fascinated by the opportunity to watch his former student—now an award-winning artist—design this portrait in person. “The way it starts,” he notes, “is something very different than where he ends up.”

Illustrating his process with an analogy, Tonape begins working on portraits the way a contractor approaches a building. He explains that he will spend a short amount of time on one eye, then shift to the nose, and then work on the other eye.

“You keep moving around,” he explains—in the same way that a contractor would work on the entire house: not build the bedroom completely, before beginning to build the kitchen.

Professor Woodson and President Bush stood behind Tonape, and both—as Woodson explains—were intent on teasing the artist, working to help him feel comfortable. As Tonape focused on capturing the first lady’s visage, President Bush would joke, “Oh, I wish you would finish that eye.”



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Chicken Fried Steak and the Pearly Gates Defense

One of the anecdotes that best illustrates Tonape’s humor and wit comes from one of his first outings in the U.S. When Tonape joined a group of colleagues for a meal, he ordered Chicken Fried Steak. One bite in, and he thought, “Wait a minute—this is not chicken.”

However, the issue was not solely the accidental misstep of one bite, the result of an honest mistake. The problem was larger: he loved it.

He theorized that if someone were to kill one person or ten people, he or she would certainly go to the electric chair—thus, if hell is the end result, he reasoned that he “might as well eat the whole cow.”

Thus, he began working on what he calls his “Pearly Gates” defense, which is based on the compartmentalization of academic disciplines.

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He notes, for instance, that we wouldn't put a Journalism class in the Chemistry department, and we wouldn't be teaching Chemistry in the Journalism department. Logically, he offers, "When I ate beef, I was in the department of Jesus."

Once Tonape had quelled his nerves—as he focused on his artistry and passion for teaching, fully engaging the iconic figures who were ultimately just regular people enjoying an afternoon with a talented artist—he felt comfortable enough to share this charming, self-deprecating story with the Bushes. They loved it.



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Clevenger earned her M.Ed. degree from

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