

Gundogs

By Tom Davis



BITTY BY ELDRIDGE HARDIE

When painting a dog portrait, the artist is challenged to convey something about his subject's attitude, personality and character.

Successful businesspeople are rarely sentimentalists. They can't afford to be. They should be fair, of course, but they need to be tough. They need to have a bit of a hard shell.

This goes double if you're in the car business – and maybe triple if you're in the luxury car business, the way Trudy Higginbotham-Moody is. Ms. Higginbotham-Moody, you see, co-owns the Porsche and Mercedes-

Benz dealerships in Jackson, Mississippi. Need I say more?

Now, while I don't know her personally, I do know her husband, Ed Moody. He's an exec with Costa del Mar, the manufacturer of high-end sunglasses; he's also a serious dog man and bird hunter, and just for the record, a hell of a wingshot. So when Ed told me that Trudy's not the kind who cries easily, well, I guess I wasn't entirely surprised by

that. It was in keeping with how I imagined her: intense, self-assured, driven (a little pun there).

But when Ed uncrate the portrait they'd commissioned Eldridge Hardie to paint of their National Champion German shorthaired pointer Echo's Little Bit of Clown – "Bitty," to those who knew her – this formidable businesswoman broke down in tears. Hardie had hit it out of the park, capturing not just Bitty's physical likeness but her attitude, her personality, her character. This was the Bitty they'd known

and loved, the Bitty whose field trial triumphs they celebrated and whose puppies they helped raise and whose passing left a hole in their hearts even as her spirit stayed vibrantly alive in their memories.

That alone would have been enough to open the emotional floodgates. But the setting Hardie had created, a South Georgia scene so warmly alive you could almost smell it – tall longleaf pines, russet sedge grass, a majestic live oak – summoned another tide of memories: the glorious days they'd spent hunting quail behind Bitty at Beaver Creek Plantation, a place that had become, for the Moodys, a few square miles of heaven on earth. It, too, had been lost, but now, through the alchemy of Hardie's art, it, too, was restored.

And a woman not given to crying wept. This may be trivial, if not completely beside the point, as far as the critics are concerned. For Eldridge Hardie, though, it's pretty damn satisfying. It tells him that he illuminated what was essential. It tells him that he got it right.

Commissioning Bitty's portrait was an idea that'd been simmering in the back of Ed Moody's mind for a long time. She was his once-in-a-lifetime dog; he'd maxed out his line of credit in order to own her (the transaction was finalized on Christmas Eve, 2000), and he was so nervous about telling Trudy what he'd done that he took her to a bar and fed her a couple stiff ones before he dropped the bomb. Of course, it turned out to be, by his own accounting, the best investment he ever made – an assessment Trudy would wholeheartedly second. (For more on Bitty's story, see *Gundogs*, J/F 2007.)

It took Bitty's passing in 2010 at the age of 12 to get Ed "off the dime," as they say, and begin to seriously pursue the idea of commissioning her portrait. Fortunately, he was aware that he was out of his depth – "I know just enough about art to

be dangerous," he quips – and so he made the intelligent decision to reach out to someone who knew the players and could guide him through the process: Mike Paderewski, the proprietor of the Sportsman's Gallery and Paderewski Fine Art in Beaver Creek, Colorado, and Atlanta, Georgia. Ed had stopped into the Colorado gallery occasionally during business trips to the Denver area and was impressed by the quality of the art on display.

"I didn't know Mike at all," he recalls, "but one day I called the gallery and asked to speak to him. Mike's one of those people who seems to befriend you instantly, and we ended up having a long conversation. It was obvious to me that he knows his stuff, but it was his honesty, his professionalism, and the sense of trust he inspired that ultimately won me over."

Paderewski helped Moody assemble a "short list" of artists who were worthy of consideration, and after studying the work of each and refining his own objectives vis-à-vis the commission, the name that rose to the top was Eldridge Hardie's. The luminously authentic quality of Hardie's work spoke for itself – there was no question whatsoever that he could deliver the goods – but what ultimately tipped the scales was the fact that, of the artists painting sporting dogs at this point in time, Hardie, in Moody's words, "is the most collectible going forward."

"This isn't to say some of these other artists won't get there," Moody explains. "But we wanted an artist whose work will hold its value over time, and right now Eldridge is that artist."

The necessary introductions were made, and with Paderewski handling the financial arrangements Moody and Hardie, over the course of a long lunch in Denver (a lunch that might have been lubricated by a beer or two), roughed out the details of the painting. They hit it off well, and Hardie, for

his part, was grateful that Moody had specific ideas on what he was looking for – but not too specific.

Adds Hardie, "Finding that 'balance point' can be tricky, but Ed and I came to a good meeting of the minds. He had some definite ideas regarding what he wanted in the background – the pines and the live oak, for example – and I liked them. I knew that I could create something interesting from those elements."

Moody also told Hardie about Bitty's career, her achievements, and the place she'd carved out in Trudy and his affections – another hugely important part of the process. I asked Hardie if painting a portrait of a dog he'd never seen or spent time with posed any special problems.

"First of all," he said, suppressing a laugh, "you have to understand that I don't do a heck of a lot of dog portraits. But when I do, it's almost always of a dog that's deceased, so I have to rely on whatever reference the owner's able to provide. Years ago Bob Wehle commissioned me to do a portrait of three of his most famous dogs – Elhew Snakefoot, Elhew Tom Fool and Elhew Dancing Gypsy – and my main source of reference was a trio of bronze sculptures he'd done!"

Fortunately, Moody had a plethora of high-quality photographs for Hardie to draw from (literally).

Complemented by a simple but elegant frame of antiqued gold, the 24- by 30-inch portrait occupies a place of honor above the Moodys' fireplace. "It gives us something permanent to remember Bitty by," says Ed. "She had a uniquely expressive personality, and El captured that perfectly. It's incredible, really. He just nailed it."

And while there'll never be another Bitty, the Moodys aren't waiting around to honor their current German shorthair star, National Champion Ike's Eshod Delight ("Dee"). They already have a deposit down for Hardie to paint her portrait, too. 🐾