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George W. Bush's Art Teacher on Their Unlikely Friendship and His 'Brave' Work: 'He Keeps Getting Better'

"There is a side to this person that people don't know," Texas painter Sedrick Huckaby says about former President Bush

By Sean Neumann | June 29, 2021 01:27 PM



From left: George W. Bush and Sedrick Huckaby | CREDIT: VALLEY HOUSE GALLERY, DALLAS, TEXAS

Texas painter Sedrick Huckaby's new portrait exhibit in Austin is meant to make visitors look at their community "like a quilt."

But one of the threads at the center of Huckaby's new series — a painting of famous Texan and former President George W. Bush — draws significant attention among visitors, there to see his latest work on display at the Blanton Museum of Art.

"The exhibit's really about seeing the variety everywhere and seeing how we're really like a patchwork — a patchwork of a community, a patchwork of a nation," Huckaby, 45, tells PEOPLE. "And he's a part of our community."

Philip Martin Gallery

When Huckaby shares stories about his time with Bush, he almost brushes off the fact that the former commander-in-chief — arguably his exhibit's most popular subject — is also his most famous student.

But the renowned oil painter's latest "George Walker Bush" portrait gets no special treatment as part of his new exhibit, displayed alongside paintings of family members, friends and neighbors from the artist's hometown of Fort Worth.

Huckaby depicts Bush's face head-on, allowing visitors to take in the wrinkles on his forehead, his fading grey hair and his blue eyes. Huckaby says he made it a point to include a glimpse of the white T-shirt Bush wore when they sat together for the portrait, and he punctuated the work by titling it with the former president's full name.

All subtle efforts, he says, to emphasize the man rather than the president.

"There is a side to this person that people don't know," Huckaby explains, recalling his lessons with Bush at the latter's Dallas home, with their usual one-on-one lunches together at the drafting table where the portraits they've traded back-and-forth with one another over the years were created.

Huckaby's three paintings of Bush have hung in galleries and museums, while Bush's own depiction of Huckaby hangs on a wall inside the artist's home with wife Letitia.

"It's one thing to give a person something you just bought, but it's another thing to paint them a painting," Huckaby says. "There's a little more sincerity in it."



Sedrick Huckaby | CREDIT: LETITIA HUCKABY

Huckaby says he long ago wrapped his head around his friendship with Bush, first meeting the former president when Bush, on the advice of another, walked up and introduced himself at one of Huckaby's exhibits at the local Valley House Gallery.

Philip Martin Gallery

"I was glad," says Huckaby, remembering how he immediately recognized Bush's voice calling his name out behind him.

"I hadn't heard of too many former presidents or even presidents painting," Huckaby says, still a little bit surprised at the post-presidential hobby.

Nonetheless, it sparked Huckaby's intrigue — despite any political differences between the two-term Republican and the "generally speaking" Democratic-leaning artist.

But Bush's "seriousness with art and how he really wanted to learn" quelled those reservations, Huckaby says.

"I thought, it's a good thing," Huckaby says. "No matter who the person is — if it was a Republican president, Democratic president, whatever — a president making paintings to me is a good thing. And if he's really interested in honestly wanting to do that? I thought, well, let's see. Let's see what's going on."

Huckaby quickly found what he calls "an ideal student" in Bush: "He was really very passionate about it, worked hard and worked all the time. He listened really well, took instructions well and he makes over a hundred paintings a year, easy."



From left: George W. Bush, Sedrick Huckaby and Laura Bush | CREDIT: VALLEY HOUSE GALLERY, DALLAS, TEXAS

Bush told Huckaby he was inspired by the landscapes the late U.K. Prime Minister Winston Churchill painted later in his own life. Churchill had called his art a great "companion," and vowed that once he left politics and war behind, it would occupy his time entirely.

Huckaby was a voice of guidance for Bush while Bush has molded his own works. And despite a rough start, Huckaby says Bush "has constantly gotten more and more skillful." His 2017 collection Portraits of Courage depicted wounded veterans — resonant, Bush said, given how he presided over American wars — and became a New York Times bestseller.

Philip Martin Gallery

And Bush's latest collection, *Out of Many, One*, which features notable immigrants, is a not just a showcase of art, Huckaby says, but one of bravery.

"Churchill was more safe with the way he painted. But you'll find that [Bush's] paintings are a little more courageous," he says.

Huckaby points out that Bush's latest collection comes at a time when anti-immigration rhetoric has been spread by former President Donald Trump, the first Republican in the Oval Office since Bush's term ended in 2009.

When Bush was asked recently on the *Today* show whether he ever considered commenting on his successors' policies, he just smiled. "I have, sure," he said, before calling for an overhaul of the U.S. immigration system — a long-sought goal which he unsuccessfully pursued while in the White House.

"I found him to be very brave and courageous as an artist and in his ability to make statements," says Huckaby. "But over from that, he keeps getting better and better in terms of his ability as a painter."

Bush's improvement has impressed his family, as well. "He's really gotten good," former First Lady Laura Bush, 74, told Kelly Clarkson recently. "I'm shocked."

The former president's one-on-one lessons with Huckaby aren't as regular now, although the artist still goes over to the Bushes' home every so often — either when the Huckabys are invited for parties, or if Bush is just looking for some feedback on his latest work.

"We're very comfortable together," Huckaby says, thinking back to the years they've spent learning about art and people.

Huckaby, whose decorated career has seen him hosting exhibits in museums around the world, is still casual when he describes their bond. "It's really cool," he says pausing for a second to think about how to describe what it's like to teach a man so famous, the artist realizes, that most people view him as "untouchable."

But for Huckaby? He's gotten to know "the ordinary person behind the persona" and sees his relationship with Bush as nothing more than another stitch in the quilt of life.

"I have had the opportunity to paint some pretty interesting people," Huckaby says. "At the end of the day, you find the same thing: People are people, you know what I mean?"

Sedrick Huckaby's exhibit is on display at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas through December.