





THE SITTER & THE PAINTER


AS THE TWO FORM A BOND,
DAVID LARNED IMMORTALIZES
HIS SUBJECT

ROGER MORRIS ✎ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM GRAHAM

The session begins as tentatively as a first date. Teresa Fort stands expectantly on a small platform, dressed in a long, gray gown, shoulders bare. A few steps away, staring at her intently, hand to his chin, David Larned ponders, then asks:

“Do you normally wear your hair up? Or down?”

“When it’s long, it makes my face look long,” Teresa says, and smiles. “But that’s generally how I wear it.” She is just under six feet tall, lean and elegant, and her smile is beautiful. She agrees to pin her hair up, and Larned helps her tighten the dress’s lacing in back. Next, she drapes a fur stole around her shoulders. After some adjustments, they decide to leave it open, hanging freely from her shoulders. Decisions on jewelry and makeup can wait until later.



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Larned next works with Teresa's footing, finalizing her marks with small pieces of tape stuck to the platform, where they join several similar markings for other subjects. Next, they move to her hands, covering or clasping one with the other.

"I think I like right over left better," Larned says. "Let's go with that."

The whole process takes perhaps 15 minutes, but in those bare 15 minutes, the two have decided how Teresa Fort—31 years old, engaged to be married, studying for her doctorate in economics at the University of Maryland and an employee at the U.S. Census Bureau—will be remembered for the rest of her life and most likely beyond.

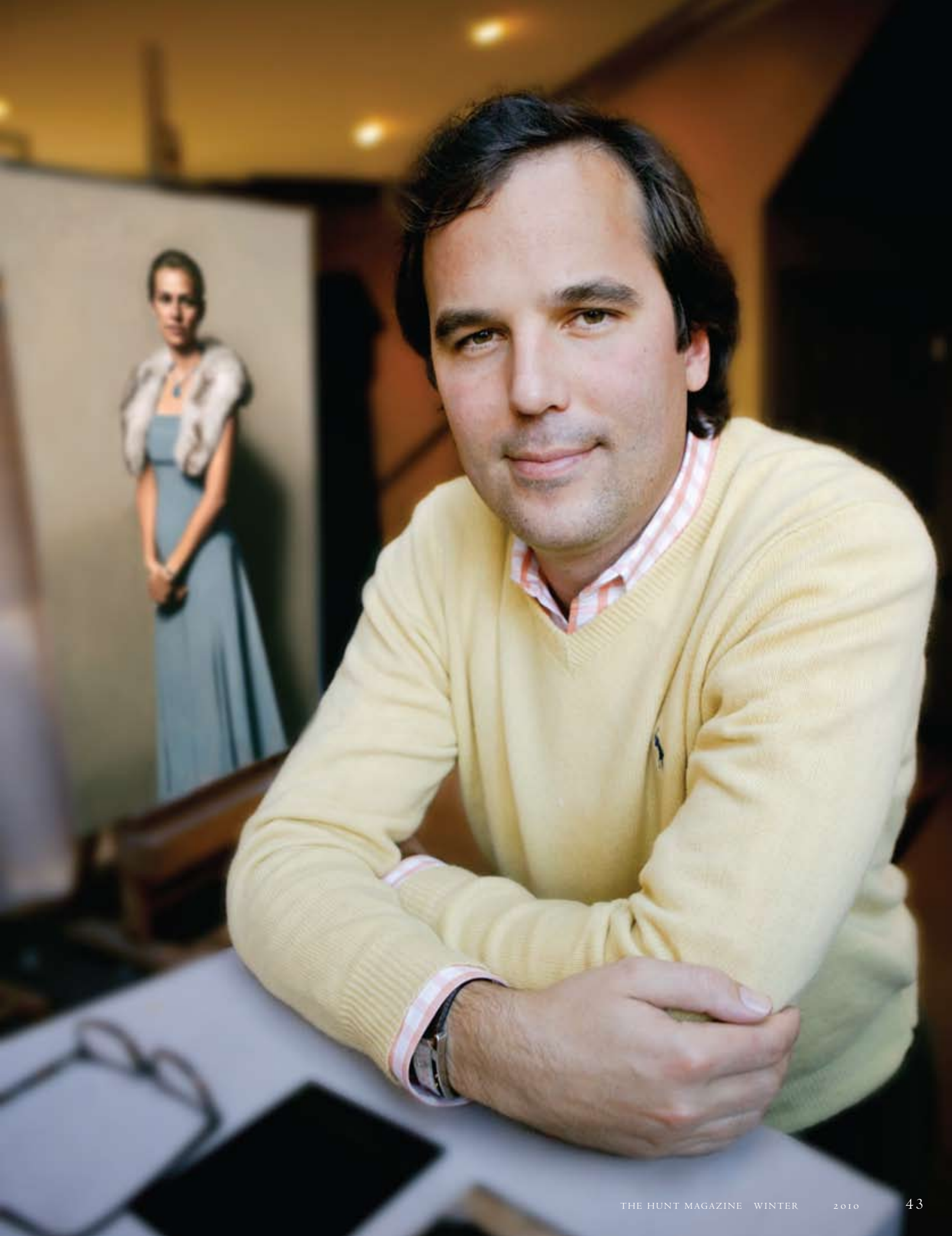
Fort is the sitter, Larned is her painter, and she is being frozen in time.

For the first time, Larned takes up a brush, his palate resting immobile on a multilevel cabinet of drawers to his left. A few feet in front of him, and perhaps a foot to Fort's left and another foot in front of her, is a life-sized canvas, tilting slightly forward on its giant easel. "I make all my observations from 15 feet," he says, "at full-life scale."

The classical music of William Byrd plays softly in the background. Outside, it is a humid, overcast September day. "It's perfect lighting for painting," the New York-born Larned said earlier as we looked up at the skylights of the artist's studio a few miles north of Embreeville. Next door is his wife's studio—Sarah Lamb is herself an internationally known still-life and landscape artist—but she is not painting this morning.

Larned, who has degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, the Florence Academy of Art in Italy, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, is 32 years old and has been painting portraits—his work of choice—for 10 years. "I finish about two portraits a month," he says, and we do the math—lots of faces and figures. "Maybe I'm a one-trick pony, but I love it," he laughs. He is a very successful one-trick pony.

Tall and angular, Larned is today dressed in a black smock over a green-and-white checked shirt, tan pants, and brown shoes. Atop the shock of black hair that laps his collar is a blue baseball cap that reads "Victory." He has recently taken to wearing glasses while he paints, he



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says. In ways, Larned's movements, as he stands 15 feet away from Fort, are like an athlete's. He leans back slightly, eyes darting from the standing sitter to the canvas and back, like a pitcher checking first and preparing to deliver a pitch.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm nervous."

"All you have to do is stand there."

They both grin.

He takes up a dab of paint, quickly strides forward—brush in right hand—and makes a short horizontal brown mark about one-third of the way up the canvas. A pause, then he makes a similar mark, four inches lower.

"Don't you start with a pencil?" Fort asks. Larned explains his brush forms that function, later explaining to me, "You break everything down into abstract shapes. You have to divorce what you know from what you see. It's not Teresa's nose, it's a shape."

He continues making strokes, occasionally erasing or smudging one with a rag. From time to time, he puts a small mirror next to his nose to for a "fresh view." After another 15 minutes, he calls a break. Today's sessions are all about sketching out the form—"putting in the anchors"—and will last three hours each with a break for lunch.

Fort, who is very athletic, riding bikes and horses, does a few yoga stretches, touching the floor with her palms. She goes off to call Gregory Piasecki, her fiancée and the one who commissioned the painting as a birthday present. "Lots of birthdays," he later amends.

She comes back in a few minutes and reports, "I told Greg I'm freaking out!" as she resumes her pose. "We'll have to invite him down for cocktails after one of the sessions," Larned says. He continues, and the form on the canvas slowly begins to look less like a collection of geometric shapes and more like Teresa Fort.

One Monday morning a few months later, as she drives back down I-95 to her job at the Census Bureau, Fort reflects on that first session and on having her portrait painted.

"I was a little nevous,

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but not too much," she recalls. "We had met David and Sarah socially a few times," which actually did make sitting for him a little more difficult, as it was now personal and not just a normal client/provider, sitter/painter relationship.

"But mainly, I was afraid I would feel bored standing there for hours," she says. "I could use that time exercising or working on a paper. But David is pretty chatty." Plus, she loved the idea of having her portrait done, although it was first the idea of Piasecki, whom she first met through mutual friends at the Radnor Hunt races.

"I got the idea for a portrait of Teresa because I grew up with portraits of my mother and other relatives in the house," says Gregory Piasecki, who heads Dragonfly Pictures, an Essington company that makes unmanned helicopters. "I thought my children should have that experience." He continues, "I was struck by David's portraits even before we visited his studio, and I gave him carte blanche to do what he thought would work." By this time, he

and Fort were engaged, and the portrait, Fort says, "has sort of become part of the wedding."

Although she and Larned considered several dresses for the portrait, "I knew that I wanted to wear the gray dress in the painting," she says. "It's elegant and simple." It also had sentimental value. "We were in Poland on New Year's Eve 2007," she says, "and Greg bought it for me."

It is now the last day of January, four long months since that first September sitting, and outside Larned's studio there is a glaze over the snow. The temperature is in the teens. Fort arrives a few minutes late and quickly goes next door to change into the gray dress, but she leaves on her construction-style boots for warmth.

It has been a hectic four months for the sitter—lots of government work, writing papers and taking exams, planning for her wedding less than three months away at her mother's home in Sewanee, Tenn., then becoming ill over the holidays.

Her portrait is largely where the two left off in September—a complete figure in gray with no details or color filled in. "I've

never had anyone wait this long between sessions," Larned admits. Fort takes her pose, and he makes a few adjustments. But today will not be as tedious as the first sitting when she noted, laughingly, Larned's pose left her gazing at the crotch of a full-frontal male nude in a painting on the wall opposite.

"The goal today is to create a color key," he says, "like establishing a key in music—the background, the flesh, the fur, the dress." They chat amiably as he works quickly for the next hour, filling in blotches of color with a small trowel for each object, adjusting for shadows and shadings. He later tells me the studio mood is important. "You have to control it. You can't have too much fun or it will show in the painting."

This time, the two set up a series of rough appointment times before she leaves. Much of the work he can now do alone. He mentally sets a finish date of mid-March.

"I really want Greg to like it," Fort says, "that it captures who I am, not just like a photograph." And, in a way, it will capture who David Larned is, too. □

