

# Picture Perfect

portrait artist susan durkee got a special madame secretary visit recently

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Portrait painter Susan Durkee rolled out a royal welcome and her delectable pecan tart in July for the arrival of Mrs. Ban Soon-taek, the wife of Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Korean diplomat brought her entourage to Durkee's Redding studio to meet the artist and view her portrait in progress.

The story of how this international meeting came to be reveals Durkee's gutsy spirit and vivacity. The portraitist had first seen a picture of Mrs. Ban in March at a Redding dinner party. Sitting next to a former UN Japanese official, Durkee and the woman began discussing how portrait painting is male-dominated at the highest level. The official told her there was a tradition of painting the Secretary-General and asked her to consider painting the Secretary-General's wife who was distinguished in her own right.

"As soon as I saw Mrs. Ban's photograph, I was inspired," says Durkee. "I wanted to paint her. She has a grace, serenity, and kindness of visage." Beyond the surface, Mrs. Ban has a distinguished life of service. "After learning more about her, I discovered she has devoted her attention to women's and children's health, including autism, the elimination of violence against women, and the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDs," explains Durkee.

The artist began the process of creating the 14-inch-by-18-inch oil-on-linen portrait with a digital image of Mrs. Ban. Just four months later that same Japanese official called to say that Mrs. Ban wanted to visit the studio.

On July 9, the international entourage—including Mrs. Ban and the wife of the Korean Ambassador to the UN, wife of the Korean Consulate General, a former UN Japanese official, and a UN security detail—pulled into Durkee’s “Lobster Pot” studio.

So named by Mark Twain over one hundred years ago, The Lobster Pot has found a devoted owner in Durkee. A self-described “Twainiac,” she has painted Twain many times. Durkee describes being inspired by Mark Twain’s courage and care for humanity, and eagerly awaits a forthcoming biography that will document his years living in Redding and his relationship with Isabel Lyon, Twain’s secretary and social companion who inherited The Lobster Pot on his death.

In addition to being a portrait painter and Twain aficionado, Durkee is also an avid horticulturist. She has created several formal gardens in the thirty years she and her husband have lived in the house. “Gardening and painting demand the same mental state,” says Durkee. “There’s an openness when you’re painting or when you’re weeding.” There’s also the consideration of color, composition, all on display in her seemingly weedless grounds.

She led her distinguished guests on a tour of these gardens, calling Mrs. Ban’s attention to the topiary turkey. Then, they went inside Durkee’s studio for the moment of truth. Mrs. Ban was delighted with the portrait, and left the necklace she was wearing in the photograph so that Durkee could finish the painting. The group then assembled in Durkee’s home to enjoy the artist’s pecan tart sweetened with maple syrup. While Durkee is primarily self-taught, she clearly has learned from the masters. “There’s always a mirror behind a portrait artists—this goes back to the day of Leonardo da Vinci,” explains Durkee. “You can see the drawing mistakes when you see the image reversed. The mirror gives a fresher look and keeps things on track.”

Durkee has painted New York Yankee Mariano Rivera, Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens, and is working on a portrait of justice Sonia Sotomayor. “I always tell my friends that having your portrait painted is the cheapest form of plastic surgery. I can turn up the corners of the mouth to make the face look happier.”

Durkee visited Mrs. Ban in New York on August 14 for the final portrait presentation and lunch at the Secretary-General’s house. “It makes me happy thinking that so many people will see my work.”