

# The Model & The Artist

by Daniel Harris

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I advertised in the local paper for a model. I received over a hundred portfolios. They were all either teenagers or women of a certain age looking for a husband. I needed a model for Cleopatra the day she took the bite of the asp. None of the women who answered the ad fit the bill. I started looking through magazines and the newspaper for pictures of a woman whose face could serve as a model.

The Sarasota library has a wonderful service; they e-mail readers when books are due. I received a notice that I had half a dozen books coming due. After lunch, I put the due books in my backpack and headed for the library. I returned my books and went to the art section on the second floor. I was searching for Matisse's *On Art*. It wasn't there, but there was a woman looking at a book about Picasso's sculpture. Her face was perfect for my concept of Cleopatra.

—Excuse me, but are you an artist? I asked.

—No, but I like art, especially early 20th century art. Why do you ask?

—Well, I'm a painter and I'm looking for a model to pose as Cleopatra. I'm planning a large picture about the last minutes of Cleopatra's life. I've advertised for models, but they are all too young or don't fit my concept. I don't mean to intrude, but you look like the woman I am seeking as a model.

There was a long silence as she looked away, returning to her Picasso book.

—Do you expect me to answer?

—Well, I guess I haven't asked. Would you pose for me? You won't pose unclothed, but in a bathing suit or leotard. I can pay you \$25 an hour. It could take ten to twenty two-hour sessions.

—No nudity?

—No. If you want, my wife can act as a chaperone.

—Where is your studio?

—It's my garage. I have AC, so it will be comfortable. You will pose on a replica of an Egyptian sofa.

—Can I think about it?

—Absolutely. Here's my card. Call me if you decide to accept, I will have my attorney draw up a contract.

—You are an artist *with a lawyer*?

—Yes. Art is my profession. I don't need legal troubles.

—If I decide to do this, when do we begin?

—As soon as you are available and sign the contract.

Her name was Karen. My attorney telephoned me and said she signed the contract. Karen called immediately after I hung up with my lawyer.

—Mr. Gringovitch, I've agreed to pose for you. Where is your studio and when do I start?

—What are the best hours for you to pose?

—I work as an administrative assistant at the county building. I could pose after five in the afternoon.

—That works for me. My studio is only a few blocks from the county administrative building. Sessions will be two hours long with a fifteen-minute break. Can you be ready at five-thirty?

—That would be good for me, she said.

—When can you start?

—Is tomorrow too soon?

—No, I said.

I gave her the directions to my studio. I told her she could change in my house and that it was usual for models not dressed in street clothes, to wear a robe when they were not posing. I would supply a terry cloth robe for her if she needed one.

The first session was short. I introduced her to my wife and cat and took her to the studio. I made some quick contour drawings, which I showed her as well as the preliminary sketches of the complete painting. I didn't want some PC or Women's Lib problem with my model. She seemed happy with everything, especially when I paid her \$50 cash at the end of the session.

I had a problem with Karen's posing. I explained to her what Cleopatra did to commit suicide and why. Karen seemed to think suicide was a happy ending. It was hard to get her to adopt the correct facial expression. I gave her some pictures of Cleopatra and some cosmetics. We spent one session making her up properly. After a week, I finally coaxed her into posing with the expression I needed. The make-up and role-playing helped.

After two weeks and ten sessions, I had Cleopatra properly painted. The balance of the painting was sketched in with blue chalk. I told Karen she was finished, but when I was doing the final detail, I might call her back to paint the proper texture and color of her flesh tones. She was happy with that and asked that I call her to see the final painting even if I didn't need her to pose.

Six months later I called her home number and left a message saying she should stop by my studio and see the finished painting.

The picture I painted showed Cleopatra with the viper, but also in the background were Julius Caesar, Anthony, the brother she killed and other major people in her life — most of whom she murdered, or had murdered. Cleopatra was the last Ptolemy and the last Greek pharaoh of Egypt. Cleopatra was a woman who used her beauty, birthright, political acumen and bedroom skills to her advantage. Among items in the background was a vague representation of an iconic phallus. Well...

Apparently Karen was offended. She hired a lawyer who had a restraining order put on my painting. When she and her female attorney visited my studio to view the completed painting, they said

nothing about the portrayed female nudity, but for them, the phallus icon was pornography.

My attorney explained to them that the contract Karen signed did not give her rights to any use of the painting, or any legal say about the content of the painting. She was strictly a model for hire. Karen and her attorney decided to threaten me with sexual harassment if I exhibited the painting. I told my lawyer there was such a thing as freedom of speech and first amendment rights. He told me, "You'll lose. Don't even go there."

I burned the painting on my gas grill. A different kind of asp killed my Cleopatra.

