

# Moments with Elsa:

## The Elsa Portrait Series

Zoe Perry-Wood

Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Kayafas

When I first noticed Elsa it must have been football season. She sat several pews ahead of me and I could clearly see the 2 inch in diameter, homemade, “Go Pats” button pinned to the bun on the back of her head. Her outfits, different every week, were eccentric, sporting bright colors, large costume jewelry and silk or plastic flower accents. Although she was always put together, she often had loose threads, holes, stains or mismatched gloves. Elsa's clothing was not the most remarkable thing about her. Members of the congregation doted on her and it became apparent that over the decades she has played many roles in not only the church but also the greater Lexington community. I approached Elsa and showing her samples from my portfolio, I proposed a portrait project. After viewing my work she stated, “Oh, you like to photograph interesting people, that’s why you want to photograph me.”

Elsa and I had regular portrait sittings for the last five years of her life. Elsa faced her aging process with just the right mixture of distinction, dignity, and denial. In her mind she was still the young multitalented artist, community activist, fundraiser and art patron, who had a big influence on arts and culture in her town. As her body became frailer, she continued to speak her mind with a raised chin but also an open mind to the world as it transformed around her. What I saw in Elsa was a life well lived, with strength and compassion. She was a champion of the arts, who valued service, loyalty and companionship. As the years passed, and our relationship grew, our portrait sessions became all day affairs. First there was the church service, followed by setting up a portable studio in the church basement. Elsa would make her way to the basement through the coffee hour crowd, with many stops on the way. We would shoot until Elsa was tired and insisted on taking me for lunch. The afternoon was spent with storytelling over a long lunch and usually a bottle of Prosecco. Often, other community members would join us or stop by the table for some banter about town politics. Elsa passed away peacefully surrounded by family on March 30, 2015 at the age of 90.