

Doing Justice to the Official Portrait of Robert F. Kennedy

By Maxine Cheshire

New York artist Aaron Shikler, who may be the only artist to paint the Kennedys as they see themselves, has done the official Attorney General's portrait of the late Robert F. Kennedy for the Justice Department.

The canvas will be unveiled March 14 at an 11 a.m. ceremony for 400 VIPs in the Great hall.

Shikler, who painted the official White House portraits of Jacqueline and John F. Kennedy, is the second artist hired by the government to try to capture a likeness of RFK that would please his family.

Gardner Cox, one of the country's most distinguished portrait painters and a Harvard classmate of JFK's, earlier had failed the assignment.

Cox, who lives in Cambridge, Mass., was working on Robert Kennedy's Justice Department portrait when Kennedy was assassinated in 1968.

A year later, the unfinished canvas was donated by Cox to the National Portrait Gallery here, along with preliminary working sketches and notes.

According to curator Robert Stewart's correspondence, the painting was rejected by the Kennedy family because they felt it had a "ghostly" quality.

"He does look thin and drawn, and the whole effect is very pale," Stewart says. "But Cox was painting from life. I saw Bob Kennedy at a party at about that time and he did look that way, as if he were working too hard."

This is not the first time that Shikler has been chosen to take over a Kennedy portrait from Cox.

"According to curator Robert Stewart's correspondence, the Cox painting was rejected by the Kennedy family because they felt it had a 'ghostly' quality."

Cox, who has a long list of Supreme Court justices and Cabinet members to his credit, was also the first choice of the White House Historical Association to paint JFK.

But after working on the portrait for a time, "he turned in his ticket," recalls Washington artist William Walton, the Fine Arts Commission chairman and Kennedy family friend who originally had gotten him the assignment.

Shikler, who had gotten to know Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis when she hired him to paint her children, Caroline and John Jr., was recommended by the former First Lady to paint both her late husband and herself.

For those two White House portraits, Shikler received \$15,000 each. In addition, he received \$75,000 from McCall's magazine for reproduction rights and a cover story on Shikler's work as "the Gilbert Stuart of the Kennedy family."

His fee for painting RFK is the

standard \$5,000 paid by the Justice Department for such works. Reached at his studio in New York, he said that he will receive no additional payment from the family and has no plans to make any commercial use of the portrait. "As far as I am concerned, it belongs to the government," he said. "I agreed to do this portrait for less money because I was intrigued with the subject."

There are reports among Kennedy insiders here that Ethel Kennedy is still "not 100 per cent satisfied" with Shikler's completed effort, although he made several changes in the canvas, begun 18 months ago, at her request.

"But I don't think the Justice Department gave her much choice this time," one friend said this week. "I think they were anxious to get something hung."

Officials there are way behind in getting the likenesses of recent Attorneys General on the walls, in keeping with a tradition dating back to Edmund Randolph of Virginia.

William Saxbe is the only one in that job in a long time to have his portrait painted and hung before he left office.

Elliott Richardson has not yet selected an artist and John Mitchell has failed to answer a letter that an Assistant Attorney General wrote him recently asking when he would be willing to get together with an artist of his own choosing.