

Companions in Art

BARBARA TAYLOR BRADFORD AND ROBERT BRADFORD,
NEW YORK, NEW YORK



Chammi

Barbara Taylor Bradford and her husband, Robert, live in a quintessential, glamorous Manhattan apartment, overlooking the East River, with spectacular views. “It is very large,” she laughs, “Robert couldn’t find me the other day. I was working in this little room off the kitchen, which he hardly ever goes into.” Barbara is a much-honored and much beloved best-selling novelist and her husband a prominent movie and television producer. She greets me at the front door with Chammi, the more social of her two Bichon Frises. “Beaji will be here in a moment,” the author explains, and sure enough, Beaji shows up in a few moments, wagging her tail.

Barbara was introduced to Christine Merrill’s work in 1992 when Barbara still had her beloved Gemmy, also a Bichon Frise. She decided to commission a portrait of her as a gift for her husband Bob’s birthday, and it was to be a



Photos of the dogs adorn a side table in the library



Barbara Taylor Bradford and Robert Bradford with Chammi and Beaji

surprise. “I didn’t tell him about the portrait,” explains Barbara, “so when we were out one day, I simply said, ‘I want you to come to this gallery. I want to show you something.’ And Gemmy was almost life-size in the portrait, and it was as if she was going to step out of the painting. The gallery had it hanging for us, already framed, and when Bob saw it, I remember that his eyes filled with tears.”

Christine’s portrait depicts Gemmy in a romantic English landscape, with small pink flowers in the foreground, a motif which the artist often uses in her portraits of female dogs. The viewing was all the more poignant because Gemmy had passed away shortly after the artist had met her. Christine depicted her as she looked at that first meeting with a beautifully groomed coat and glowing eyes.

Gemmy had been a wonderful companion for Barbara and Bob over the years and, looking back, the author credits Gemmy with saving her life. Like



Beaji

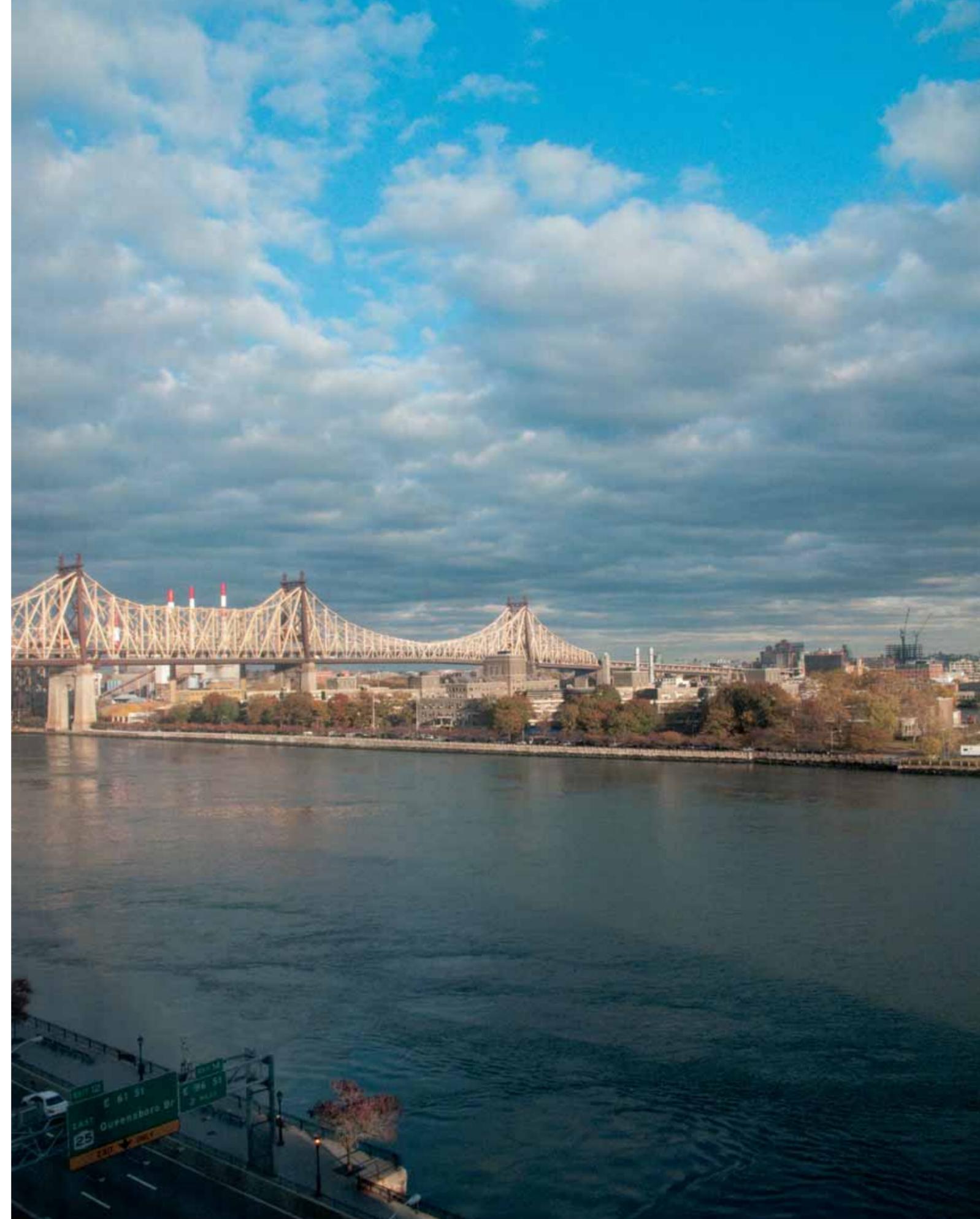
so many of us, Barbara had smoked cigarettes for some years, and no amount of cajoling from Bob or her friends had convinced her to quit. “I was in my office in the apartment we owned before this, which was modern in design. It had a cream lacquered desk with wide sides instead of legs and Gemmy would curl up under the desk when I wrote. One day I dropped something on the floor, and, as Bob stood up from retrieving it, his white shirt brushed against the inside end of the desk. Suddenly the white shirt had a dark mark on it.”

Barbara was shocked to realize that the mark was from a build-up of nicotine from her smoking. “Bob looked at me and said, ‘You’re killing that dog.’ I stopped smoking that very minute. And he always tells people, ‘It didn’t matter that she might be killing herself or me, it only mattered about Gemmy!’ And he was right.”

Barbara had a chance to repay Gemmy a few years later. “I was in England on book business in 1987 and Gemmy was in New York, being looked after by our housekeeper. She called me one day to tell me that Gemmy had lost the use of her back legs and that the vet was recommending surgery. A vertebra had imploded in Gemmy’s spine.” Barbara rushed back from England on the *Concorde* the next day. “I went with just my handbag and

Opposite: *A view of the East River and the Queensboro Bridge, as seen from the Bradfords’ Manhattan apartment*

Christine Merrill, Gemmy, 1993, Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches





Christine Merrill, Gemmy in a Landscape, 1993, Oil on canvas, 24 x 22 inches

passport, got off the plane in New York and went directly to see the vet, Dr. Barbara Kalvig, who was then caring for Gemmy. I agreed to the operation at once.” Gemmy had the operation a few days later at New York’s famed Animal Medical Center, but she later became paralyzed. “I would go to see her twice a day and Bob always came with me once a day. The housekeeper visited Gemmy once a day as well. They kept her in the hospital for six weeks, giving her water exercise by trying to get her to swim in the pool. Eventually she was able to move her front legs, and she came home.”

Because Gemmy’s back legs still did not function properly, it was important for her to get continuing exercise. To facilitate this easily, Barbara fashioned a sling from two folded towels, and walked her while supporting her stomach with the sling. It must have been an extraordinary sight to see the best-selling author walking back and forth in the street, holding a home-made sling which supported Gemmy’s rear end. Amazingly, she recovered fully, walked again, and lived another five years!

Gemmy is gone now, but Christine Merrill’s portrait of her hangs prominently between the windows in the Bradford’s master bedroom, and it dominates the room. Christine also painted another portrait of Gemmy for her third New York solo exhibition in 1994. It is less formal, with Gemmy casually lying on a richly textured damask sofa, looking out at us as if she is about to jump off. Barbara has it hanging in the library, opposite where she is sitting with her current Bichon Frises, Beaji and Chammi. “They have been photographed by practically every magazine in the world and they are like little movie stars. And one of our companies, Beaji Enterprises, was named after Beaji, so in a way, I work for her.” Like Gemmy, Beaji and Chammi follow Barbara everywhere, and stay with her when she writes. “I put a dog bed under the desk where I write, and added quilts to make it comfortable. When I start working, however, Beaji leaves the dog bed and walks to the bathroom where she likes to lay on the cool tiles, and Chammi takes her place under the desk. Maybe it’s my legs that are in the way or it’s the noise from my typewriter, but they always move around like this. It’s funny!”

The Bradfords got first Beaji and then her cousin Chammi from the prominent Bichon Frise breeder, Mimi Winkler. Beaji is short for *bijou*, the French word for jewel and Chammi is a made-up name because it reminded her of Gemmy’s name. “I just invented it,” explains Barbara. “We can say they were named for Bijou and Champagne, and if we get another one, she could be Cavi, for caviar. Chammi is the more social of the two dogs, and each have their own unique personality. When we have people for dinner, they both keep us company for a while, but then they disappear. And we always laugh because Chammi loves to lay on top of pillows, and we’ll find little indentations all over the bed because she’s been on every one of the pillows.” As if on cue, Chammi jumps out of Barbara’s arms and climbs onto the back of the sofa. She lays down on the highest pillow and looks at us as if to question why we are paying her so much attention.



One of Christine Merrill’s paintings reproduced on a silk pillow