The Dunlop family is one of Sydney’s major medical dynasties. Search the alumni database for Dunlop, the list runs to more than 20 names, and many are related. Aside from Gillian’s medical siblings – Catherine, Iain, Jennifer, Helen and Anthony – her uncle Iain (MBBS 1942) died in PNG in WWII shortly after graduating, aunt Barbara (MBBS 1944) enjoyed a long medical career.

“I always wanted to do art but my father thought I should do something that would ensure I could support myself. He had also come home for years with wonderful stories about patients and ophthalmology so it wasn’t a difficult decision.”

For the next 15 years, art took a back seat as she established a medical career. She graduated in 1988, trained as an ENT surgeon and then specialised in rhinoplasty. She is now in private practice in Sydney’s north, operating mostly at the Sydney Adventist Hospital (SAN) and Hunters Hill Private.

It wasn’t until her mid-30s that art reclaimed a focus. She started to regularly attend art classes and to spend more time working on the portraits and sculptures for which she is increasingly known. Her fellowship year was spent with a Harley St rhinoplasty surgeon “but I spent just as much time at the Chelsea School of Art.”

Her portraits, the most recent of which is of the University’s Chancellor Professor Marie Bashir, are in “old Dutch master” style. They are realist portrayals of the subject, they reflect her interest in hands and faces, also in light and form. It is a style that is more traditional and finished than in a lot of more modern portraits, as regular attendees at the Archibald exhibition at NSW Art Gallery could attest.

The technique is meticulous, labour-intensive and lengthy. It starts by taking a lot of photos and with personal exchanges which give some insight into the portrait subject. She draws the portrait in charcoal, paints first in sepia and then begins the pain-staking process of painting layers. Most of her portraits have between eight and twelve layers. In between each, to allow the paint to dry, she needs to wait for a week.

“I’m not supporting you for the next 35 years, get a job,” Donald Dunlop (MBBS 1946) said to his daughter Gillian when she finished school and said she would like to study art. He prevailed and she - like her five brothers and sisters - studied medicine.