

# Portraits - Seminar 1

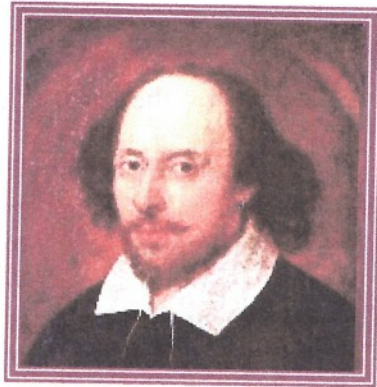
## *Background Notes*

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**WAHG**

## PORTRAITS Lecture Notes N°1

### The CONTEXT



#### *Attitudes towards portraiture*

The National Portrait Gallery was formally established on 2 December 1856, and amongst its founder Trustees were Earl Stanhope as Chairman, Macaulay, Benjamin, Disraeli and Lord Ellesmere, a former Trustee of the National Gallery, who offered to the nation the so-called *Chandos* portrait of Shakespeare. This portrait became the first picture to enter the Gallery's collection. The Gallery was established with the criteria that it was to be about **HISTORY**, not about **ART**, and about the status of the sitter, rather than the quality or character of a particular image considered as a work of art. *These criteria are still used by the Gallery.*

Portraiture's putative association with copying and imitation has often caused the art form to be dismissed or to suffer from a low status. This dismissive attitude to portraiture persisted among

professional artists - even amongst those who ironically made their living from portraiture. A reason for this is the Renaissance art theory's emphasis that the creative artist should invent and represent ideal images thus relegating portraiture to the level of a mechanical exercise, rather than a fine art. This tendency to undermine the practice of portraiture lingered on to the early nineteenth century. Indeed it continued to prevail in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries during the period of *modernism* when the rhetoric of avant-garde experimentation led to a valuing of concepts over mimesis. Yet some of Picasso's most effective early experiments in Cubism were his portraits of the art dealers. Picasso provided enough detail in his cubist portraits to distinguish the features of his sitters

### ***Portraits are worthy of separate study***

They are different from other genres or art categories in that they are distinctive in:

- the ways they are produced,
- the nature of what they represent,
- their function as objects of use and display.

### ***Production***

Portraits nearly always require the presence of a specific person or at the very least an image of that person. In a portrait, the **patron**, the **sitter** and the **artist** all wish to record *something* about themselves. They all direct these revelations to the **onlooker**. A portrait not only reveals these *somethings* it also discloses (*deliberately or unconsciously*) a lot of additional information regarding its social and historical context.

***A portrait is a WORK OF ART that represents a unique individual.*** It is a work of art because it is a selected posed image of a real person – that is of someone who exists or has existed. A portrait expresses the likeness of a particular individual but it is more than a representation contained in a person's physical features. It can also

- depict the subject's **social position** or **inner life** such as their character or virtues.
- be subject to social or artistic conventions that construct the sitter as a **type** of his/her time.
- probe the **uniqueness** of an individual in a way that sets the sitter apart from his or her context.

Thus a portrait can reveal specific and distinctive aspects of the sitter and the more generic qualities valued in the sitter's social milieu. Physically it represents the body and face of the sitter whilst revealing something about his/her character and the context of his/her time and place.

***Portraiture's capacity to do all these things at once makes it a powerful form of representation.***

### ***Likeness is not a stable concept***

Although the expectation of the onlooker of a portrait is that it represents a *likeness* of the sitter this is subject to varying factors. Firstly what might be considered a faithful reproduction of features relates to aesthetic conventions and social expectations of a particular time and place. Secondly different approaches to *likeness* are taken by artists working within the same context and conditions. An observation of any two portraits of the same individual by different artists reveals

just how unstable ideas of *likeness* can be. Furthermore an artist in his/her execution is influenced by those who commission the portrait, the sitter and by the varying purposes of the portrait such as:

- recording a person's beauty, personality traits, skills, tastes etc
- recording a person's social position and/or event in that person's life.
- projecting an image of power and influence of the depicted individual and/or of the position that he/she holds and of the organisation that he/she represents.
- recording the painter's skill

Basically a portrait is a statement that is directed at the onlooker. Thus it requires a reaction from the onlooker. In order that the onlooker can do so he/she must read the signs that the artist has included in the image.



***A lady*: David Ghilandaio c 1489-90**

### *How a portrait might be read*

Firstly ascertain who is represented and when and where it was made and who made the work. The reason for doing this first is that it should get you in the mind set to interpret the portrait in its context. Then analyse the Key elements of the portrait. These are:

- *The face*
- *The Hands*
- *The body*
- *Its costume*
- *The setting*
- *The accessories*

The face, hands and posture will indicate to you the mood and action being depicted. The defining elements of the face are its eyes, nose, mouth, ears and eyebrows and their relationship to one another. *Dürer*, like Leonardo da Vinci, believed that the nose determined the whole character of the face.

Facial features are crucial to identity. Yet the general proportions and positions of individual features are common to most adult people of the same race. It is in the small variations that distinguishes one individual from another. Significant variations can also be achieved by the painter's angle of vision and lighting

Renaissance painters, amongst others thought that the eyes convey the soul of a person. Thus most paid great attention in depicting the eyes. Thus their shape, colour, brightness, the direction of their focus and the position of the head in relation to the spectator all convey information to the spectator.

The facial expression in a portrait usually conveys a message or mood. Yet until mid 19thC **reality**, that is the factual portrayal of features of the sitter were rarely the main concern of the painter. The

prevalent art theory was that the painting should improve on nature. Some painters considered that portraiture should reflect '*the mind of the inner soul*'. If the sitter had a beautiful mind then the face should reflect that beauty.

### ***The Hands***

***In life and in art the hands are central in conveying emotions.***

Throughout history differing civilisations have given prominence to hands but there is a difference between the Occidental and Oriental minds for the Occidental has never visualised its gods having more than two hands. There are 1227 references to the hand in the Revised version of the Bible. Since in the Judaic concept the representation of God was forbidden the hand was used to designate the presence of God. During the first 11 centuries AD Christians were also forbidden to make an image of God the Father.

*Thus to express his will artists placed God behind a cloud with his hand coming out of the clouds. It was during the Renaissance that God the Father was represented as an old man e.g Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine chapel of the creation of man.*

### ***The Body***

When studying the body consider its posture. Does it and its shape conform with contemporary norms?

***Costume is closely allied to Body shape***

When studying costume consider whether the costume is:

- in fashion for the period?
- specific to an appointment, a profession, trade etc.?
- is appropriate to age and circumstances?
- classical?

### ***The setting & the accessories***

Usually posit the person in her/his time and place, occupation and position. Also they often provide information as to why the portrait was commissioned at that time.

### ***Be aware of artistic conventions***

For example like Botticelli's images of females, those by Ghirlandaio reveal an aesthetic compromise that emphasises an idealistic stylisation and the decorative harmony of the whole. This style appeared at a time when portraits were spreading among the middling classes and there was a growing taste for *realistic* though *idealistic* characterisation of figures, which corresponded to a general trend towards humanising art. Ghirlandaio managed to create a local atmosphere by maintaining a type of figure that did not show excessive concern for detail.

### ***Factors that militate against realism***

- **Posterity.** Because there is a certain permanence about portrait paintings the intended effect on posterity was often as important a consideration of the sitter as the persuasion of contemporaries. *The sitter's and/or patron concern was how he or she was to be viewed now and in the future.*
- **Artistic Practice** Until mid 19<sup>th</sup>C **reality** that is the factual portrayal of features of the sitter were rarely the main concern of the painter The artistic convention was that the painting should improve on nature.
- **Belief in the soul.** Some painters considered that portraiture should reflect '*the mind of the inner soul*'. If the sitter had a beautiful mind then the face should reflect that beauty.

- **Patrons' interference** Painters were subject to a flow of instructions correcting their works to the tastes and prejudices of their patrons and the results often reflect these rather than the truth - otherwise they might not get paid!

*Portrait categories that often emphasises common compositional features include:*

- **Rulers** - symbols of power not on personality
- **Aristocracy** - Attention to rank
- **Religious** - actions such as prayer, preaching, charitable acts etc.
- **Heroes** - dominant position within composition
- **Equestrian** - control of horse thus can control men
- **Politician**
  - a. *In power* display of Aristotelian ideals
  - b. *In opposition* display tract, making speech etc.
- **Theatrical** - display of emotions
- **Criminal** - coarse facial features

*Portraits can raise strong and varying emotive responses from spectators*

*Throughout history and in varying cultures people have wished their portraits to reflect an altered self image.* Their reasons include:

- Social reasons - status in society
- Hierarchical
- Projection of Power
- Marital
- Employment/Function

- Attractiveness *According to perceived fashion of the social group.*
- Mitigate deformity
- Projection of personality traits *Meek, submissive, strong, trustworthy etc*

Thus in analysing a portrait consider the possibility that the painter has colluded with the sitter to alter the image before him/her.

Also be aware that ALL Portraits REFLECT the Style & Brushwork of the Artist. Portraitists have their own signature, every artist will approach a face in a particular way

### **A Portrait is a Revelation**

*It is left to the consumer (the onlooker) to read and assess these revelations and to decipher the additional information that the portrait contains.*

### ***THE LOOK - WHAT DOES IT CONVEY?***





**THE HANDS - WHAT DO THEY CONVEY?**



**THE POSTURE - WHAT DOES IT CONVEY?**



**THE ACCESSORIES - WHAT DO THEY CONVEY?**



Some information about the portrait can only be obtained outwith of it, usually by studying written sources.

BUT

The portrait itself is a primary source of information that normally contains a wealth of social, historical, aesthetic and artistic details of the period that it was created.

The more that one looks at the painting and analyse its various aspects the more that these aspects reveal themselves



The difference between an *arrogant* Rolin and a *humble* one is stressed through the way each artist has suited his altarpiece to the purpose for which it was intended - the first a context of family power, and the second a place of disease and death.