An Introduction to Portraiture
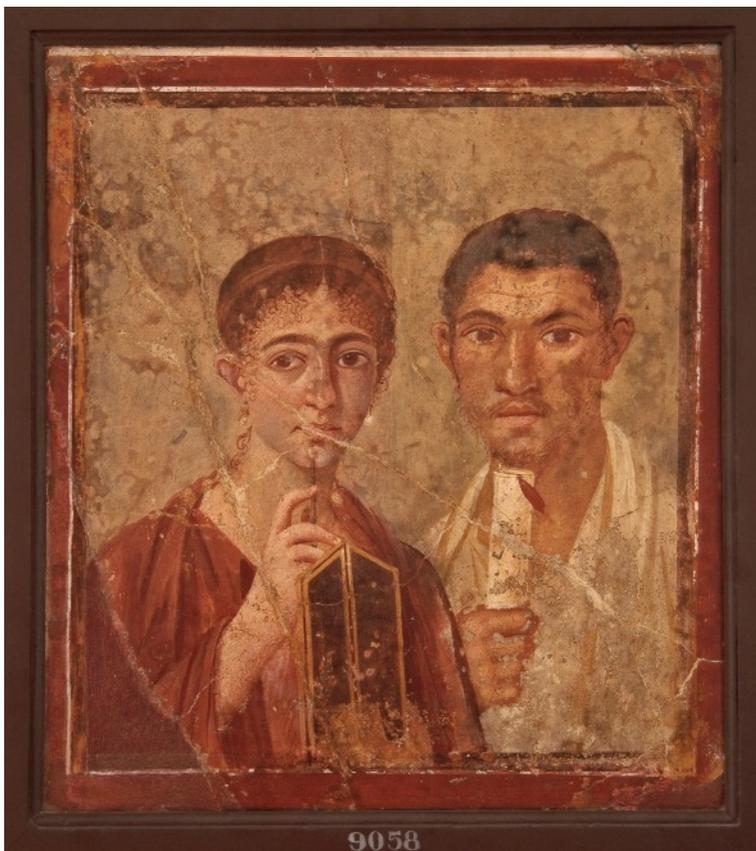
Background Notes

Beth Taylor - 23 Oct 2013

Terentius Neo and his wife
A portrait from Roman Pompeii

Some definitions

"portraits are art works, intentionally made of living or once living people by artists, in a variety of media, and for an audience"
R. Brilliant

"The human face is not one thing…it has infinite varieties….There must be a comprehension of the whole, and a moral sense…to unravel this confusion…You must dive into the hidden soul…"
W. Hazlitt

A portrait is an image *"in which the artist is engaged with the personality of his sitter and is preoccupied with his or her characterization as an individual"*
J. Gere

"Portraiture is not an act of the momentary…The aim of painting is to give insight….appearance is important only as an expression of thought."
R. Scruton

"there has to be a recognized or potentially recognizable person involved, whether they sat for an artist or were depicted from memory or from an existing representation, possibly after death…..portraits depend on an idea of likeness.   But ….Portraits follow conventions…tacit rules which make sense at a particular time and place…."
L. Jordanova

Outline history of Western portraiture to 1918

Ancient Greece: tomb sculpture or public statues

Classical Rome: individual portrait busts, paintings

Roman period Egypt: Fayum district mummy portraits

Medieval period: tomb sculpture, portraits of Emperors

15th century: beginning of professionalisation of European portrait painting
Donors in religious paintings, free standing portraits

16th century: Greater diversity of style – detailed settings, full-length figures, varied subjects
portrait specialists
subject of religious controversy - acceptable and non-acceptable images
increasing refs to portraiture in art theory
cultural context in which concepts of individual identity began to be verbalised

17th &18th centuries: itinerant portrait painters
Portraiture significant in England France and the Low Countries
Development of the genres of biography and autobiography and increasingly articulated ideas about character and personality

19th century:	expansion of portraiture
	Publicity value of portraits especially if stylistically daring, grandiose or insightful

end 19th/
early 20th century: experimentation with new ways of evoking the personality, status or profession of sitters
developments in psychology- deeper explorations of individuality and personality

Types of portraiture

- Self portraiture

- Portraits of individual subjects

- Paired portraits

- Family group portraits

- Group portraits – civil and institutional

- Artists' groups

- Allegorical portraiture

- Ethnographic portraits

Uses of portraiture

Political and social functions
- Dynastic
- Proxy or gift
- Commemoration and memorial
- As judicial and legal document
- Political tool
- Propagandist
- Personal/biographic
- Symbol of social status

The analysis of portraits

1. Ludmilla Jordanova's key questions:

- Identity of sitter, patron, artist and their social networks
- Date, provenance
- How the image came into being
- Physical context
- Existence of related images – portrait practice in general
- Size
- Medium
- Proportion of the body represented – bust, full face, profile, half length, three quarter length, full length
- Presence or absence of accoutrements
- The palette
- The pose
- The proportion of the canvas taken up by the sitter
- Dress
- Hair
- Background
- Frame
- Intended location

2. Lorne Campbell's framework:

- Individualisation – likeness assured
- Idealisation – flattery
- Characterisation – the hidden soul

3. Liz Riddeal adds:

- Differences in historical context
- artistic style
- intention
- class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation

Suggestions for further reading on portraiture

Brilliant, R.   *Portraiture*, Reaktion Books 1991, 1997
                       (reprint)
Campbell, L.   *Renaissance Faces*, National Gallery, 2008
Cumming, L.   *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits*
                       Harper, 2009
Jordanova, L.   *Defining Features: Scientific and Medical*
                       Portraits 1660–2000, Reaktion Books,
                       2000
Pointon, M.   *Portrayal and the Search for Identity*,
                       Reaktion Books, 2013
Riddeal, L.   *Mirror, Mirror: Self-Portraits by Women*
                       Artists, National Portrait Gallery, 2001
Sturgis, A.   *A Closer Look: Faces*, National Gallery
                       2009
West, S.   *Portraiture,* Oxford University Press, 2004

The portrait in Vienna – National Gallery Exhibition briefing

'Facing the Modern: The Portrait in Vienna 1900' explores an extraordinary period of the multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-faith city of Vienna as imperial capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918). The exhibition looks back at middle-class Vienna in the early 19th century, the so-called Biedermeier period, as represented by artists like Frederich von Amerling and Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, whose portraits were 'rediscovered' by the city's modern artists in 1900. It then moves to the 1867 – 1918 period to consider images of children and families, of artists, and of men and women in their professional and marital roles.

The period began with liberal and democratic reform, urban and economic renewal, and religious and ethnic tolerance, but ended with the rise of conservative, nationalist and anti-Semitic mass movements. Such dramatic changes had a profound impact on the composition and confidence of Vienna's middle classes, many of them immigrants with Jewish roots or connections. Portraits were the means by which this sector of society - the 'New Viennese' - declared its status and sense of belonging; portraits also increasingly served to express their anxiety and alienation.

Gustav Klimt *Adele Block-Bauer 1* **(1907)**