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Spring 1986

Some Questions About Portraits

La Salle University Art Museum

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Recommended Citation

La Salle University Art Museum and Burke, Brother Daniel FSC, "Some Questions About Portraits" (1986). *Art Museum Exhibition Catalogues*. 66.

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**SOME
QUESTIONS
ABOUT
PORTRAITS**



One of the great mysteries of life, as we know from daily experience, is the personality of friends or acquaintances. It should come as no surprise, then, that among the more mysterious forms of art is that in which we attempt to portray another person. In gathering a number of portraits from the sixteenth century to the present time for this exhibition, our intention is simply to raise and to probe some basic questions about portraits. We hope, too, that, as we allude to other, typically larger portraits in our collection, you will want to pursue such questions with them.

**SOME
QUESTIONS
ABOUT
PORTRAITS**

**LA SALLE UNIVERSITY
ART MUSEUM
SPRING, 1986**

What is the difference between a “likeness” and a “portrait”?

A stick-man drawn by a child in a kindergarten is a likeness. A passport photo is a likeness. Any representation of a person—from the sketchiest arrangement of lines and circles that we understand is meant to represent a human to the most detailed photograph of the features of a human face—is a likeness. Any time the elementary “words” of line, shapes, and colors have been arranged in the iconic “sentences” that say “human” in a painting, print, or photo, we have a likeness.

But a “portrait” is more than a newspaper photo that captures a person at one instant of natural life. Or rather the portrait is a special kind of likeness. It seems usually, for example, to have more detail and individuality—the late Roman bust as opposed to the archaic or classically idealized sculpture, the Mughal as opposed to the Hindu miniature. On the other hand, one has only to look at the “sketchy and spontaneous” portrait of Madame Hessel by Edouard Vuillard or the possible self-portrait which Georges Rouault called *Le dernier romantique* (both in our 20th century gallery) to see that individualizing detail is not an absolutely essential element.

What a portrait always seems to have, however, is more meaning, more complexity, and so more interest than a likeness where meaning and value may simply be a matter of identification or of putting a name to a picture. “The reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness,” says Aristotle, “is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, ‘Ah, that is he’” (*Poetics*, IV). But to the grammar of simple correspondence, the portrait adds the rhetoric of personality; it gives, that is, an impression of the sitter’s personality, of what, given his or her history, is now characteristic. A portrait, said Oswald Spengler, is a “biography in the kernel.”

Thus, the length of figure and its pose; the features of the face and their expression; the setting with its particular props and lighting—these and other elements are developed and related in special ways, not simply to identify the sitter but rather to impress the viewers and interest them in what *seems* to lie within the sitter’s appearance as intelligence and will, motive and habit, emotion and attitude. If, as Kenneth Clark has suggested, the “nude” in art is the “naked” clothed in gesture, then the portrait is the likeness clothed in characteristic expression. A smile is not critical to identity in a likeness; in Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* a very special smile points to the essential mystery he presents.

Portraits may try to say more about a subject than a likeness, but is that additional information necessarily accurate or true?

Having just come near to saying just that myself, I had better qualify. The generally received opinion is that yes, portraits do offer more accurate, more essential information about the sitter. Consider the observations of Whistler, for example:

The imitator is a poor kind of creature. If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this: in portrait painting to put on canvas something more than the face the model wears for that one day; to paint the man, in short, as well as his features.

(*The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, Prop. 2)

This version of the received opinion, of course, doesn't do justice to a photographer like Thomas Eakins, whose photographs of his wife are as superb as his paintings of her. But, more important, it also claims more than is necessary, that the portrait presents the "real" man as well as his features. There are some cases when a viewer can indeed judge whether a portrait does "justice" to the sitter, whether it shows that she is short and has red hair, but also suggests the fullness and complexity of her character and history. And in such cases, as Goethe observes, "one is never satisfied with a portrait of a person one knows." In many other cases, however, we "know" the sitter only through a tradition or through the re-creations of biographers and historians. When that is the case, we are generally content to judge that a few characteristics have been suggested in the portrait, together with a typical pose we may expect from other portraits of the subject.

In the case of most portraits we see in our museums, however, we simply do not know the persons who are portrayed. The portraits themselves offer us all the evidence available about the personality, indeed about the appearance, of the sitters. But from any of these portraits we are led to speculate about personalities: Reynold's "Miss Hippeley" has an air of hauteur that suggests that she is not at all as pleasant a person as Mrs. Louisa Lushington whose portrait by John Hoppner hangs beside Reynold's in our eighteenth century gallery. The tilt of the head, the expression of the eyes and mouth, the mood of the setting—the artist is using all such details to create a specific impression as convincingly as possible, as convincingly as a Madison Avenue ad man creating a "Housewife" or a "Yuppie" who will try to sell us a headache cure or a car. Such "convincing suggestions" are rhetorical constructions of the artist, not representations that can be measured against a defined reality, certainly not the complex reality of a human personality.

Do the rhetorical intentions of the portrait artist, therefore, simply override his basic purpose to produce a likeness?

Yes, though I don't think that the term *override* fits all cases comfortably. The rhetorical intentions of the portraitist cover a wide range; they can result in slight adjustments or very radical alterations of a potentially more exact physical likeness. At one extreme—in caricature, for example—the artist is clearly telling us more about his own attitudes than about the personality of the subject. But to some lesser degree, he is always betraying his personal view of the sitter or is subtly trying to sell his interpretation of the sitter as, say, happy-go-lucky or paranoiac—or simply interesting. In another direction, he may even decide to utilize a good-likeness-with-convincing-personality for other purposes in his final work.

In "The Lace Maker," for example, D'Ascenzo does not present the old woman as an individual, but as a typical worker in a delicate craft. The title of the painting signals this emphasis, but only externally. What *in* the painting signals this more generic interest? The profile rather than a frontal pose? In the relatively small space, the use of the full figure, rather than half or quarter figure? The subject at work rather than at rest? The instruments of the craft emphasized in the setting?

Related questions could be raised about Reginald Mills' "Seated Lady with Red Shawl". Here the pert young woman, who is neither staidly seated nor wearing the red shawl, looks down on us with the self-assurance and air of independence that we associate with the liberated. Not simply the title but the pose and setting indicate that the artist is concerned not so much with the particular likeness as with the thematic suggestiveness of a "type." A similar subordination of figure to theme or to an implied narrative situation is clear in "The Loss of Innocence" by Jerome

Witkin, or "The Red Night Shirt" by Norman Blamey (both in the twentieth century gallery), the latter with the artist's son as the model. In a more elevated vein, Henry Tanner's "La Sainte Marie" (hallway) presents an accurate rendering of his new wife but obviously not a portrait, since it represents another person who figures in a clearly biblical setting. Models, however accurately represented, are not subjects of portraits.

On the other hand, "A Boy as Cupid," by Rembrandt's pupil Nicolaes Maes (seventeenth century gallery), seems more clearly to intend

an accurate physical description of a particular youth, as he convincingly moves through space immediately before the spectator's eyes. Cupid's accessories—the bow, arrow, and wings—are secondary, alluding perhaps to the mischievous and clever behavior of the boy. (*Guide to the Collection*, p. 33)

Much the same can be said for the huge prop in the allegorical portrait of Louisa, Countess of Sandwich as "Hope," by Sir Thomas Lawrence (eighteenth century gallery) or for the trappings of "official" portraits such as in the "Marchesa della Rovere" by Sustermans (hallway) or the "Duke of Buckingham" by Gerbier (seventeenth century gallery).

In the portrait artist's mix of intentions, therefore, the rhetorical purpose may only slightly modify his basic aim to create a realistic likeness—to stress his own interpretation of that personality, or, in more extreme ways, he may want to suggest his own attitudes and feelings. He may, on the other hand, achieve an accurate likeness but then subordinate it to some thematic purpose in a genre, historical, or religious painting. This process of overriding or, it would be better to say, utilizing elements achieved for one purpose for still another purpose is not unlike the simultaneous process of using all such elements finally to make a work of art. This process (or aspect of the total complicated process) involves still further choice and adaptation of various stylistic codes and conventions: shall the portrait, for example, idealize, romanticize, or "realize" the subject? But most important of all, the process involves the continual, creative response to the unique felt pressures and requirements of the work as it evolves, the successful realization of the new possibilities which it generates as it grows.

But when finally is a likeness or a portrait a work of art?

A likeness, as in a genre painting, is a work of art not simply when we feel that an interesting representation of a human person, fictional or real, has been made. A portrait is not a work of art when we simply feel that an individual personality has been convincingly suggested. In either case, the physical elements conveying these meanings have not achieved a unity and appropriateness in their relationships that are in themselves a pleasure to see.

What Aristotle discusses as artistic errors in poetry (*Poetics*, 25) suggests, as do remarks of other theorists down through the tradition, that the ultimate essentials of art lie beyond simple meaning or likeness:

Within the art of poetry there are two kinds of faults—those which touch its essence, and those which are accidental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something [but has imitated it incorrectly], through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice—if he has represented a horse as throwing out both of his legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine, for

example, or in any other art—the error is not essential to the poetry.

In Eastman Johnson's genre painting "The Old Umbrella Mender," for example, a strong "type" of black woman is presented—elderly but still active, at work in fact but restfully, comfortable and secure (the well-appointed bed, the stout rocker with its well worn and highlighted arm, the scarf (?) thrown over the chair) despite the strong suggestion of poverty (above all, from the battered umbrella). As the woman is bent over her work, her face is not so much emphasized as her hands or the furnishings of the room, especially the bed. Her hands suggest long endurance, but a survival with serenity and dignity.

The artistic vitality of the picture, however, is in the richness of its color, bright reds, whites, blues played against more neutral browns and blacks, especially the black mass of the umbrella itself. But the play of color has a muted tonality, a soft gradation of pastel shades that seems veiled gauzily to harmonize with the worn and dusty room and the elderly woman. And what seems a casual and slightly disordered bit of genre realism is carefully composed along the axes of an X design that moves in one direction with the bed-rail and the striped cover toward a parallel with the woman's forearms and the arms of the rocker. That line is then crossed, centrally by the thrust of the umbrella, a thrust begun on one side by the stool top and scissors and the lower supports of the rocker, and continued on the other side by the line of the sheet to the wall.

There is no inherent artistic value, of course, in any particular geometric design or in a particular combination of colors. The artistic values of the representation are in the consistency and fitness with which all these elements have been related harmoniously—a sense of harmony between the sensuous effects of the pastel surface as a representation and the set of meanings it conveys, a sense of unity in all the elements of line, color, and meaning so that we do not feel that anything is intrusive, is unnecessary, is too much or too little.

Some of the vitality and strength of Johnson's genre scene is offered by the portrait of "The Artist Georges Michel and His Son" by Jean-Marie de Gault (signed in the lower-right and dated in the calendar established after the French Revolution, *le 10 Prairial l'an VI de la R.*, that is, May 30, 1797). De Gault had been a miniaturist and he sometimes decorated the Queen's own furniture with his work. After the Revolution and the loss of royal patronage, de Gault was, like many artists, thrown on his own resources, took to larger paintings for the Salon, and, in slack time perhaps, to small portraits of other artists like the present one.

The historical point is made because several features of the portrait relate closely to its social context. The teal blue of Michel's coat, for example, together with its broad red stripes and the collars of white shirts, echo the tricolor of the Republic. The prevailing neo-classical style of the period is also evident, with its emphasis on line and sculptured volume rather than on painterly color, its paradoxical mix of conservative Renaissance influences (the over-the-shoulder pose, for example may well come from Raphael, who used it in several portraits like the "Bindo Altoviti" in our National Gallery) and republican realism and freedom.

The subject itself, a father and son, also reflects the official demand for more art concerned with the simple virtues as well as the heroic—after the frivolity and luxury of rococo art. Thus, in the same year of this portrait, Joseph Lavallée addressed a poem to the *Societe Philotechnique* (quoted in James Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France*, 134) in which he exhorted artists to concern themselves with the domestic virtues that support a stable society:

Peignez surtout, peignez, le respect filial, Et l'amour paternel, et
l'amour conjugal . . .

But while we can see such meanings in the painting and while we can assume that the likeness of the father is basically competent (though, perhaps, not that of the son), we must look elsewhere for the ultimate aesthetic values of the work. We must look, that is, to what is done uniquely here with such meanings and to how they are related to the composition of the physical elements used to create them.

First of all, the citizen-father and devoted son are given some individuality, vitality—and ambiguity—here that they might not have if they were seated simply facing the viewer. Rather the artist is seen turning from his work, as if to address an interruption or inquiry. The tilt of the head, the arm thrown casually over his portfolio of sketches (?), the hand with the poised brush, the side-long self-assured glance—all suggest that he is an energetic craftsman but one comfortably at work, too. His coat heavy and warm, his collar open, his curly hair slightly dishevelled, his son at his knee (has he been sketching him?)—all suggest a man at ease with himself and tolerant of interruption. Not all these details may be interpreted correctly. But, in addition to a simple likeness, there seems to be a “scene” or a “scenario” which suggests possible relationships, ambivalences, contrasts. And such differences are paralleled and supported by strong contrasts in the composition. Against a dark background, a strong light molds the face of the painter; the slashing red stripe crosses the wide blue of his coat; the series of arcs, beginning with the line of his arm and moving through the fold at the elbow, the seam at the shoulder, the curve of his back to his head, is countered by a series moving in the opposed direction, beginning with the son’s head and moving through the collars and the red stripes. And there is the more general contrast between republican realism and freedom—and neo-classical clarity, grace, and restraint.

De Gault’s painting of the artist Michel is not faultless; the rendering of the son leaves something to be desired and he seems to crowd the composition. But the painting does have artistic value. That final and most important element of a good portrait can be sought in the other paintings, drawings and prints that have been gathered here. We hope that you will see that there are significant differences in their quality and that reasons can be found for those differences.

Daniel Burke, F.S.C.
Director

Exhibition Check List

1. Anonymous (French, 19th century?)
Miniature Portrait of a Young Boy
Watercolor on vellum
4 x 3¼ ins.
Lent by Thomas Wistar, Jr.
2. Barthel Bruyn, the Younger (active c. 1530-1607/10), German
Portrait of a Lady
Oil transposed to canvas
17¼ x 14 ins.
Lent by the John G. Johnson Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

3. Jean Marie de Gault (1754-1842), French
The Artist, George Michel and His Son May 30, 1797
 Oil on panel
 9 x 7¾ ins. 73-P-109
4. W.L. Wyatt (active 1795-1827), British
Humphrey Austin 1827
 Oil on panel
 12 x 9½ ins. 77-P-206
5. John Linnell, the Elder (1792-1882), British
Portrait of an Elderly Gentleman 1815
 Oil on panel
 9-6/8 x 6-7/8 ins.
 Loan: Private Collection
6. Margarethe Loewe (1854-?), German
Girl with Apples
 Oil on canvas
 15½ x 12½ ins.
 Lent by the Woodmere Art Museum
7. William Adolph Bouguerreau (1825-1905), French
Portrait of a Child 1872
 Oil on canvas
 19½ x 19 ins.
 Lent by Drexel University Museum, Gift of Anthony J. Drexel
8. Elihu Vedder (1836-1923), American
Portrait of Giorgina c. 1886
 Oil on heavy paper panel
 12 x 10½ ins.
 Lent by the Delaware Art Museum, Gift of the American Academy of
 Arts and Letters, 1955
9. Unknown (19th century)
Portrait of a Young Man 1861
 Oil on canvas
 16¾ x 13 ins. 79-P-243
 Given by Edward Bernstein
10. Sir William Orpen (1878-1931), Irish
Sketch of Lord Milner
 Oil on canvas
 9¼ x 7½ ins. 72-P-95

11. Michael Peter Ancher (1849 — ?), Danish
Soren Emil Carlsen
 Oil on canvas
 13 x 10 ins. 84-P-301

12. James W. (Bo) Bartlett (1955 —), American
Self-Portrait
 Oil on panel
 12 x 16¼ ins. 85-P-315

13. Nicola D'Ascenzo (1869-1954), Italian-American
The Lace Maker
 Oil on panel
 13½ x 10½ ins. 78-P-212
 Given by Monsignor Walter A. Bower

14. Reginald Mills (contemporary), American
Seated Lady with Red Shawl
 Oil on panel
 11½ x 9½ ins. 74-P-152

15. Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), American
The Old Umbrella Mender c. 1858-59
 Pastel on grey paper
 13½ x 18½ ins.
 Lent by the Delaware Art Museum, Special Purchase Fund, 1965

16. Mihaly Munkacsy (1844-1900), Hungarian
Study for "The Last Sleep of the Condemned Man"
 Oil on panel
 13¾ x 13½ ins.
 Lent by the Woodmere Art Museum

17. James Hanes (1924 —), American
Br. Daniel Bernian, F.S.C.
 Oil on canvas
 23 x 18 ins. 72-P-100

18. Unknown (contemporary)
Portrait of a Boy
 Oil on canvas
 18 x 15 ins. 73-P-133

We are indebted to several museums and collectors for loans to the present show and to the Hunt Manufacturing Company for a grant used in part for the preparation of prints and drawings also displayed.

