

IF WE BEGIN with what a portrait is, there are many similar definitions, whether they are sourced from dusty academic tomes or the latest Wikipedia update. However it is worth stating at the outset that this project represents portraits of the Western art world, and in case we forget, the idea of portraying a person as a centre of their own unique and distinctive life – and placing them as an individual against their social, political, economic and cultural background – is a rather peculiar idea within the context of many world cultures.

Physically the recognised role of a portrait is an artistic representation, and interpretation, of a person in which the face is usually the primary focus of the artist and the viewer. The artwork can be created using different media, such as photography, print or sculpture, but within the following text, painting is the predominant method under consideration (and arguably more historically important).

Within the genre of portraiture there exist endless variations on a theme. Portrait painting can depict the subject ‘full length’, ‘half length’, ‘head and shoulders’ (commonly referred to as simply ‘head’), ‘in profile’, ‘three-quarter view’ and ‘full face’. The subject can be an individual, a couple, groups, families, sometimes with a pet by their side, or surrounded by items from their personal and professional life, or even, as was often the case in so-called ‘swagger’ portraits, displaying the wealth (commonly in the form of buildings and land) acquired in the subject’s lifetime. They may be clothed, nude, indoors, outside, standing, seated, reclining and so on.

Historically portraiture is a complex arena, overwhelmingly preoccupied with the naming of subjects and identification of portrait artists and the devices they use. In contrast, if we take a bowl of apples resting on a cloth-covered table to be a ‘still life’, we are usually aware that this is an artificially constructed scene that relies on the intervention of the artist and a history of representation, composition and meaning around, for example, domestic settings. With portraiture, critical and descriptive writings have developed over the centuries to emphasise disparate sub-categories such as the referential character of the portrait, patronage, portrait conventions and artist/sitter relationships. Although the immediate response to a portrait is formal and aesthetic, this is often compromised by the transfer of interest from the image to the person.

Because of the degree of importance attached to the viewer being able to evoke recognition and connection to the actual person being portrayed, some degree of resemblance is normally required. Although this resemblance can act as a restriction on the image's freedom of reference, with it has appeared the term 'likeness' as a synonym for portrait. This likeness, for the vast majority of the intended audience, is deemed vital as a measurement of the success of the portrait as an artwork.

Think about the first moment you look at a painted portrait of someone you are familiar with. There's a good chance all of us have experienced this, even if it was a school classmate creating a self-portrait in art class. The most immediate reaction is 'how close is the likeness to the actual person?' If this has been successfully achieved, there will be a favourable and celebratory response. The comforting aspect of portraiture is you don't have to be an expert to evaluate its success. With a portrait anyone can express a firm and confident opinion, particularly the immediate family and friends. The portrait itself not only represents the person, but also their life, and the people acquainted with it.

Historically portraiture in art shows us what it is to be human. It isn't just another trend to entertain, a fleeting fad rendered obsolete by the next innovation. It is life. It is an intimate visual reminder of what life can be, what potential we can achieve. Nowhere is this achievement in portraiture more confidently displayed than during the annual BP Portrait Award at The National Portrait Gallery. Initiated in 1990 at a time when more traditional art disciplines seemed to be, at best, pushed into the margins by the dominance of new-media innovations, the BP Award continues to grow in popularity, both with the public and the artists (though tellingly, not with the critics). With nearly 2,000 entries last year, the technical and artistic standard remains high, and yearly the exhibition stimulates further – arguably democratic – interest in portraiture.

So where did it all start? Portraits have been with us for at least 5,000 years. The Ancient Egyptians excelled at it, carving their gods into human form. And immediately that's when the lies began. For portraiture has mostly been about avoiding the truth. Human beings in positions of power and influence cannot always bear reality and all its imperfections. Real life is too messy, too ugly: someone has to take responsibility for the manipulation of their image. In tomb sculptures, images were exalted and beautified, more fabulous and serene than their mere counterparts in life. Encouragingly, much later in Greek art a feeling of being alive, of actually 'being' human, was starting to be infused into the work. Greek statues were created to look like themselves, like people. There's no question these were artworks, a powerful abstract form, but now they had parts, joints, expressions – they looked natural and realistic, even if still very idealised.

Much has been written about classical sculpture being an inspiration for artists during the Renaissance. This, combined with acute observation of the natural world around them, meant artists using line, contrast, tone, form and space to create for the first time a convincingly weighty physical presence on the painted surface. In the hands of a craftsman such as Michelangelo the angles, twists and gesticulations of the body and face (not forgetting masterful understanding of perspective and anatomy) fool the brain and the eye to communicate the very real sense of three dimensions.

At the time – around the 1540s – Leonardo da Vinci published his treatise on painting, in which he is responsible for developing the technique of creating form using rendering in terms of light and shade, which is still called by its Italian name, *Chiaroscuro*. The new medium of oil paint now made it possible to increase the tonal range from very light to very dark. While it took longer to dry than the previous methods using distemper or tempera, subtler effects were easier to achieve. Leonardo also blurred the edges of areas of shadow, giving them a smoky quality called *sfumato*. In works such as ‘The Virgin and Child with St Anne’, the viewer can see how carefully graded the flesh tones are, how the edges are softened, and how that same shadow has a shape which precisely reflects the underlying bone and muscle structure. However the edges of the forms vary, and some are much sharper than others. You soon realise that where the edges are soft, the eye is encouraged to travel round and create movement (and life) in the forms of the figures themselves. The sharper edges seem to thrust forward out of the picture plane and recede again when the edges are more blurred. This technique is hugely popular with photorealist artists working today; Omar Ortiz is an excellent contemporary example.

Portraiture in Western art is particularly sensitive to changes in the perceived nature of the individual in Western society. From the 15th century onwards there was a rise in human self-confidence (and self-awareness as a member of society), so suddenly people from all walks of life wanted to be represented ‘from the life’, and in a range of styles. Jan van Eyck, Hans Holbein, Rubens, Velázquez and Rembrandt, themselves as artists all experiencing a meteoric rise in status, all met over the centuries demands of both realism and imaginative transformation. A whole armoury of portrait types and forms were developed, from popular miniatures (to be carried on the person), to full figures at larger-than-life size.

Portraits that promote status as well as capturing the likeness of an individual fall into the category of society portraiture. The beautifully fluid society paintings of John Singer Sargent captured the ideals of his turn-of-the-century era, by transforming his subject into perfect archetypes of the time – gracious, intelligent, well-dressed participants in high society life. Some of the work of Archibald John Stuart Wortley at a similar time falls into this category. Images of portraits by some of the Barnsley artists are shown in the plates.

There is, of course, a strong case for saying that over time only the rich and powerful have been memorialised in portrait painting. Now it has become commonplace for middle-class patrons to commission portraits of themselves and their families. Whether they are paintings to commemorate, celebrate, fulfil the needs of vanity and ego, or simply record a particular moment in a person’s life, today portrait painting is in as much demand as ever.

There have always been exceptions to the notion that all portraiture is somehow idealised. At the beginning of the 19th century Goya found flattering one’s sitters very problematic – even if they were Royalty of Spain and he happened to be in their pay as Official Court Painter. The phrase ‘warts and all’ allegedly derives from Oliver Cromwell’s instructions to the painter Sir Peter Lely, when commissioning a portrait. Although Lely was well known for flattering the sitter in celebrated paintings, such as those of Charles II, Cromwell was



'Lilian Eldee' by Archibald John Stuart Wortley. Courtesy of Royal Academy of Music

BELOW LEFT

'William Thorp of Gawber Hall (1695–1774)' attributed to William Tate
Courtesy of private owner

BELOW CENTRE

'Rev'd John Sharpe Lawson MA LLD (1841–1904)' by Ernest Moore. Courtesy of Barnsley Arts, Museums and Archives Service (Cannon Hall)

BELOW

'Halliwell Sutcliffe' by Ernest Moore
Courtesy of Grassington Folk Museum



'Mr Tate of Toxteth Park' (sister of Miss Tate) by William Tate c. 1800. Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool (the Walker)



BELOW

'Miss Tate' by William Tate c. 1792–95
Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool (the Walker)

BELOW CENTRE

'Mrs Tyas' by Abel Hold
© The Trustees of the Cooper Gallery

BELOW RIGHT

'Girl with Lamb' by Abel Hold 1842
Courtesy of Victoria Jubilee Museum, Cawthorne



opposed to all forms of personal vanity. The resulting 1653 painting, according to the comparison using Cromwell's death mask, was an accurate record of his appearance.

There are other considerations. Is a portrait simply capturing the likeness of the sitter? It has long been argued that the aim of a 'true' portrait is to present not only the outward appearance of the person, but also their inner significance (this differs from caricature, which attempts to reveal character through exaggeration of physical features). A common notion is that every portrait painted with feeling, with internal expression, is really a portrait of the artist, not the sitter: it is the artist who reveals themselves on the canvas.

The relationship between the artist and the sitter can vary enormously. On average most portrait artists require a handful of sittings – as did Lucian Freud with his now infamous portrait of the Queen – while some prefer to complete the work within a single sitting; Goya was known to prefer this method. Alternatively late 20th-century artists Frank Auerbach and Euan Uglow, while both working in very contrasting styles, would often require more than 100 sittings, over many months, to complete one work.

Traditionally it was not unusual for the artist, such as Hans Holbein, to make a drawing of the face, and then complete the rest of the painting without the sitter. Many artists would produce a portfolio of drawings taken from life, allowing the client to select the most preferable (read, most flattering) pose. The most widely used method today relies on the use of photography as a source reference material of the sitter, often supplemented by a number of sketches produced at the same time, which relieves the artists of that pressurised formal encounter of painting from life, a situation not always possible because of the portrait's time demands on the sitter as much as on the artist. Purists may decry the use of photographic reference as a 'cheat' to the tradition of classical portrait painting, but with the Camera Obscura widely used by artists for around 500 years, who's to say photography would not have been freely employed since the 15th century had it been available?

The widely held, but mistaken, view about the arrival of photography in the mid-19th century was that it signalled the death of painting. Suddenly here was a new medium that reflected the very real nature of the world around us – and the people living in it. There's no question that for portrait painters the industry suffered; the work trailed off at first while everyone got excited about this magic development. But many painters heaved a small sigh of relief. Photography could do the dirty work for them. Painting was suddenly free to do as it pleased, to go (creatively) where it wanted to. And photography has actually enhanced and expanded the look of paintings, introducing new compositions, strange picture editing, and ways of capturing a fleeting moment. Painters have long envied the ability of photography to capture instantaneous reality and have sought to do likewise. Gerhard Richter, one of the most important and influential painters working today, has been producing portraits for decades that paradoxically look like grainy, blurred, poor-quality random photographic snapshots, yet remain bound up in the time-honoured tradition of analytical, painstakingly painted portraiture.

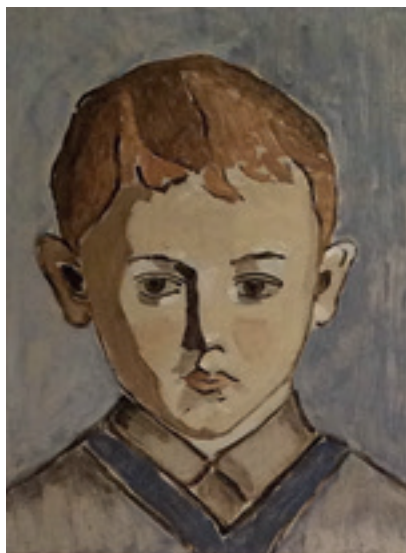
'Boy with Cello' by Barker Fairley
 Courtesy of private owner



BELOW
 'Red haired boy' by Barker Fairley
 Courtesy of private owner

BELOW CENTRE
 'Huntley Gordon' by Barker Fairley
 Courtesy of private owner

BELOW RIGHT
 'Sketch of Sir Laurence Olivier' by Sheila
 Graham
 Courtesy of private owner



Back in the early 20th century, alongside the explosion of photography for the masses, there was a darker presence, and reality for artists became unbearable as the world witnessed more death and suffering than ever before. Surely the art of portraiture really was dead among this godless, twisted world? How could portraits flourish when we had such radical doubts about ourselves? Think of the portraits of Picasso, Francis Bacon, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach. People as unrecognisable human beings, the face pulverised and remade in the tortured image of something barely recognisable as a face at all. This is not always as grim as it sounds – time, and the art of representation, moves irreversibly on. Many modern painters, who often seem to have lost interest in representational truth, have in fact extended traditional concepts of portraiture whilst also introducing new styles and techniques, along with new sorts of content. The plates illustrate mid to late 20th-century Barnsley artists.

And so to the portrait itself. A portrait painting is a composite image of many hours painting from the sitter (or via sketches/photographs), capturing the subtle but continuous shifting and moving. The artist may first do a complete pencil, charcoal or oil sketch, often directly onto the canvas. Props would be set up on occasion, sometimes lay figures or even life-size dolls were used to help establish and execute the pose. What may at first appear to be an effortlessly painted portrait can be deceptive. Although Anthony Van Dyck's 17th-century court paintings appear today fresh and elegant, he always followed a strict sequence: sketching, underpainting, painting, shadowing, heightening and final touching.

Thomas Gainsborough began his portraits by painting in a room with scarcely any light, which allowed him to see the main area of tone without being distracted. He then increased the light to bring up more detail as he wanted it.

The colour and tone of the ground, or base colour on which to paint on, is down to the artist's personal preference. As was common in his time, Rembrandt employed a dark background and worked towards the light, bringing the composition forward, highlighting the important parts of the people involved, concentrating the relationships within the painting.

Normally a portrait shows a person looking directly at the painter in order most successfully to engage the subject with the viewer. As long as portraits have been created, the eyes remain the core of the composition. As with the interaction of meeting people in our daily lives, the eyes are the one place one looks for the most complete, reliable and pertinent information. The tired cliché of 'the eyes following me round the room' remains a firm truism: there is that moment when we come face to face with a portrait. We first see a real person, and then an oscillation begins between the art object and the human object that gives a portrait such an extraordinary grasp on our imagination.

Portraiture invites us into a relationship with the painting, even into the experience and life of the sitter. When you stand a few feet away from a portrait in an exhibition, there is space between the two of you, and in that space hopefully exists a relationship with a wordless narrative that speaks directly to you with emotion and empathy, and a connection between the past and present.

(Note: Where oil paintings and artists are referred to in the text, they can be viewed on the BBC 'Your Paintings' website: www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings)

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