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Painting Portraits

# Painting Portraits

*Anthony Connolly*

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For Coleman and Bridget

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*Magdalen, 2003 (oil on canvas).*

CHAPTER 1

**INTRODUCTION**

'It's not as if an instinct which lies in the race of men from way before Sassetta and Giotto has run its course. It won't. Don't listen to the fools who say that pictures of people can be of no consequence ...'

*R.B. Kitaj*

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## What Is Portraiture?

Our ideas about portraiture are probably rooted in a period that begins in the late middle ages and continues until the end of the seventeenth century. This period saw the revival of the individualized, *au vif*, portrayal of the powerful, influential and successful. The seventeenth century was the era of Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens and Diego Velázquez, and of the most exquisite painting from life. By the nineteenth century, the portrait is very often, although of course not always, a solid signal of status. Like much Victoriana, such paintings are usually highly crafted, over-engineered even. They can be so well-finished that sometimes one feels the paint has been polished up to produce pure alabaster and the sitter, in consequence, is petrified. In the twentieth century, Modernism set off in pursuit of the interior. Inner truths were sought, unlikely and unfamiliar faces, gathered in *Painting Portraits from Africa* or found in doodles, acquired resonance. 'Unlikeness' became valued and portraiture, which really exists only to represent likeness, waned as a result.

That we should still be making and cherishing painted portraits, then, is something of a conundrum. The annual BP Portrait Award exhibition, hosted by the National Portrait Gallery in London, is one of the highlights of the popular cultural year. The annual exhibition of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters at the Mall Galleries, also in London, draws thousands of visitors. These shows may not attract quite the same glare of media attention as the Turner Prize, but my impression is that the actual footfall is probably greater. Portrait painting doesn't just survive; it thrives. It persists through all the stuttering complexity of change, through the spurts of action and reaction, imitation and contradiction, through all the layering of new and newer technologies. Through turmoil and fashion, people keep making, and sitting for, painted portraits.

Robert Campin, *Portrait of Painting Portraits a Fat Man (Robert de Masmines)*, 1425–30.

In Europe, recognizably individual portraits date back to the early fifteenth century (although

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they were possibly not described as portraits until the sixteenth century). Robert Campin's *Portrait of a Fat Man* (Robert de Masmines), 1425–30, is Painting Portraits an example of the closely observed likeness that still characterizes much contemporary portraiture. There is no attempt to idealize; Robert de Masmines has a fleshy, unbecoming gaze.

Fayum mummy portrait, *Woman With a Double Painting Portraits Strand of Pearls*.

The early fifteenth century seems to have been an historical period during which an intensity of looking and recording became necessary or desirable. Prior to this, only Roman portrait busts aspire to Painting Portraits the same degree of reality. There are times, perhaps, when our individuality, our uniqueness, has to be set or recorded. It is unlikely, however, that the function of a painted portrait in fifteenth-century Flanders would be the same as the function of a painted likeness today. Beliefs, values, technologies, our understanding of what it is to be human, have all changed since 1430.

It is conceivable that a painted representation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was used in the way a photograph might be used today, as a communication of appearance. In 1538 an English ambassador in Painting Portraits Brussels arranged for Hans Painting Portraits Holbein the Younger to paint Christina of Denmark. Henry VIII wanted to see the Duchess's likeness because he was thinking of marriage. She eventually Painting Portraits married elsewhere, but Henry was much Painting Portraits taken, it seems, with the sixteen-year-old depicted in Holbein's painting. Indeed, her likeness still captivates; the painting Painting Portraits now hangs in the National Gallery in Painting Portraits London. Nowadays, we have more immediate, technological means of communicating appearance, although similar Painting Portraits transactions are probably just as risk-laden.

In 1956, the then leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, attacked the 'cult of the individual' and specifically the cult of Stalin. Khrushchev argued that this cult 'brought about rude violation of Party democracy, sterile administration, deviations of all sorts, cover-ups of shortcomings, and vanishings of reality'. More recently, the cult of the individual has Painting Portraits had other, more Painting Portraits venal, manifestations and cult status has become rather more easy to acquire. I have certainly heard a thirteen-year-old refer to an acquaintance

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as a 'legend'. The prospect of becoming famous has elbowed its way up in the collective psyche from being a consequence of achievement to being a career aspiration in itself, fuelled by 'reality television'. 'Celebrity' even has its own professional hierarchy – 'C listers' and 'B listers', all hoping one day to be 'A listers'. Fame has been democratized, as was foretold by the shaman, Andy Warhol. It has to be self-evident that we have all scratched away at Painting Portraits reality a little Painting Portraits by becoming complicit in this cult of the individual. The Co-operative Funeral Service recently conducted a survey of music played at funerals. Frank Sinatra's rendering of 'My Way' was the song most frequently requested to mark a person's Painting Portraits passing. This might be trivializing the point, but portraiture must owe something to our continuing, our rampant, fascination with the individual; with ourselves as celebrities.

Nevertheless, since the Renaissance the portrait has undoubtedly become something of a mark of status, a fitting tribute to a remarkable individual. The great and the good, the celebrated and the infamous, have all gone under the brush. Ironically, the very great are rarely the subject of very great portraits. The subjects of those truly unforgettable paintings, such as the portrait of Baldassare Castiglione by Raphael, are often rather minor historical figures. Even those who were kings, like Philip IV of Spain, are arguably more Painting Portraits easily remembered today because they were painted by such painters as Velázquez. Another example, Madame Moitessier, may well have done it her way, but we think of her now because her husband, a wealthy banker, had the means and judgment to commission Ingres to paint her portrait. When we call to mind Painting Portraits the painting of Lord Ribblesdale, we remember John Singer Sargent, just as in the crematorium it is difficult not to think of Frank Sinatra.

If, however, we want to have a larger appreciation of the relevance of the painted portrait today, Painting Portraits we might have to look beyond notions of the individual, beyond reality television or the Renaissance for a precedent. The earliest painted portraits to survive in any number are the so-called Fayum paintings. Although the practice of interring funerary masks with mummies dates much further back, the Fayum paintings were made during the first and second century AD and were found in necropolises in Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century. These paintings, just like Holbein's painting of Christina of Denmark, were functional. The art critic and novelist John Berger assigns two distinct functions to these haunting paintings. The first is as a memento for the family and friends of the deceased during the period of embalming, which could last seventy days. The second function Berger likens to a passport photograph, preserving identity during the journey to the Kingdom of Osiris. These paintings were ultimately not for popular consumption, as they were buried with the Painting Portraits corpse. They represent an attempt to preserve tangibly both the likeness and the soul. I can't think that the two terms, likeness and soul, are synonymous, but the

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