



Introduction

Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of George Gisze [1] depicts a member of the Steelyard, a group of German merchants who represented the Hanseatic League in London during the reign of Henry VIII. What we can see in this portrait is a man with a sombre expression, gazing out of the picture but past the viewer, wearing a well-made but unornamented costume and a plain flat cap. Gisze is surrounded by objects: the table, covered with a patterned cloth, is littered with account books, quill pens, and money boxes; the shelves are cluttered with instruments of measurement and cartography. The effect of Gisze's workroom is paradoxical: it is chaotic, yet claustrophobic; a utilitarian space decorated with an incongruous (and precariously placed) flower in a glass vase. The setting and accoutrements in the room are painstakingly delineated, with the textured effects of the thick tablecloth contrasting with the grain of the wooden walls, the sheen of Gisze's sleeve, the feathery waves of his hair, the copper and brass boxes, and the delicate glass of the vase. The subtle crafting of the detail contrasts with the lack of attention to laws of perspective. The room seems to exist in an unreal space, and the profile of Gisze's face is tilted at an impossible angle, allowing us to see the whole visage, rather than only a part of it. The pieces of paper that are seemingly left casually about the room contain legible writing. Several of them repeat Gisze's name, including the letter in his hand addressed 'to the excellent Gisze, in London, England'. An inscription on the back wall, written in a mixture of Greek and Latin, translates, 'The countenance which you perceive is an accurate image of Gisze', and it gives his age as 34, and the year of the portrait as 1532.¹ In contrast to this documentary reference, another inscription, apparently carved on the wall itself behind Gisze's left shoulder, is more oblique. It reads: 'Nulla sine merore voluptas' ('No pleasure without sorrow'). This motto is signed by Gisze himself.

Holbein's portrait of Gisze gives the effect of providing a definitive image of a specific sixteenth-century London merchant in his workplace. We can gauge some idea of Gisze's work from these objects: they suggest that he was literate and numerate, that he was busy and prosperous, and that he conducted his business beyond the confines of England. But even a cursory examination of the portrait provokes more

Detail of 1



questions than it answers. Why did Holbein paint this particular merchant? To what extent is this representation faithful to the sitter's likeness? Why use such a chaotic profusion of objects, when a simple set of scales and account books would have been ample to signal his trade? What do the tags on the wall signify? What was Gisze like—are we to see his character as melancholy or arrogant, neither, or both? What appears at first to be a virtuosic exercise in the representation of objects dissolves into ambiguity when we take into account the enigmatic demeanour of Gisze, the cluttered and oppressive surroundings, and

1 Hans Holbein the Younger

George Gisze, 1532

Although associated with Basel, Holbein came to England twice—in 1526–8 and again in 1532—and both times he specialized in painting portraits. During his first trip he gained the patronage of Thomas More and members of his circle. On his second visit he began by producing portraits of German merchants, but soon came to the attention of Henry VIII. This was one of Holbein's first London portraits during his visit in 1532. Gisze was a merchant who was a member of the Steelyard—the Hanseatic League in London.

the conspicuous reminder that life is filled with sorrow. Holbein's portrait of Gisze seems to evoke the literalism of a specific person in a specific time, but its indeterminacy engages the imagination and prevents a closed and definitive interpretation.

Holbein was an exceptionally skilled portraitist, but the tensions and ambiguities apparent in the portrait of Gisze hold true for most portraits. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines portraiture as 'a representation or delineation of a person, especially of the face, made from life, by drawing, painting, photography, engraving, etc.; a likeness'. Other semantic roots of the term attach it to the idea of likeness: for example, the Italian word for portrait, *ritratto*, comes from the verb *ritrarre*, meaning both 'to portray' and 'to copy or reproduce'. However, this simple definition belies the complexities of portraiture. Portraits are not just likenesses but works of art that engage with ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places. 'Identity' can encompass the character, personality, social standing, relationships, profession, age, and gender of the portrait subject. These qualities are not fixed but are expressive of the expectations and circumstances of the time when the portrait was made. These aspects of identity cannot be reproduced, but they can only be suggested or evoked. Thus although portraits depict individuals, it is often the typical or conventional—rather than unique—qualities of the subject that are stressed by the artist, as demonstrated in Holbein's *George Gisze*. Portraiture has also been subject to major changes in artistic practice and convention. Even though most portraits retain some degree of verisimilitude, they are nonetheless products of prevailing artistic fashions and favoured styles, techniques, and media. Portraiture is thus a vast art category that offers a rich range of engagements with social, psychological, and artistic practices and expectations.

Portraits are worthy of separate study because they are distinct from other genres or art categories in the ways they are produced, the nature of what they represent, and how they function as objects of use and display. First of all, in terms of their production, portraits nearly always require the presence of a specific person, or at the very least an image of that person. Although not universally the case, the production of portraiture has typically involved sittings requiring a direct involvement between the artist and subject(s) during the process of making the work of art. In the case of sitters who were too important or too busy to undertake frequent visits to an artist's studio, portraitists could use sketches or photographs of their subject. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, portraitists could reduce the number of sittings by concentrating solely on the head and employing professional drapery painters to complete the work. The English artist Sir Peter Lely, for example, had a pattern book of poses that enabled him to focus on the head and require fewer sittings from his aristocratic

patrons. Portraitists could be asked to provide likenesses of individuals who were deceased, as, for example, with portraits of children before the twentieth century—many of whom died before a portrait commission was completed. In such cases, prints or photographs of the model could be copied. Portraitists could in principle rely on memory or impression in producing their work, but documented examples of such cases are rare. However, whether they based their work on sittings, copying another likeness, or memory only, the practice of portraiture is closely connected with the implicit or explicit presence of the sitter.

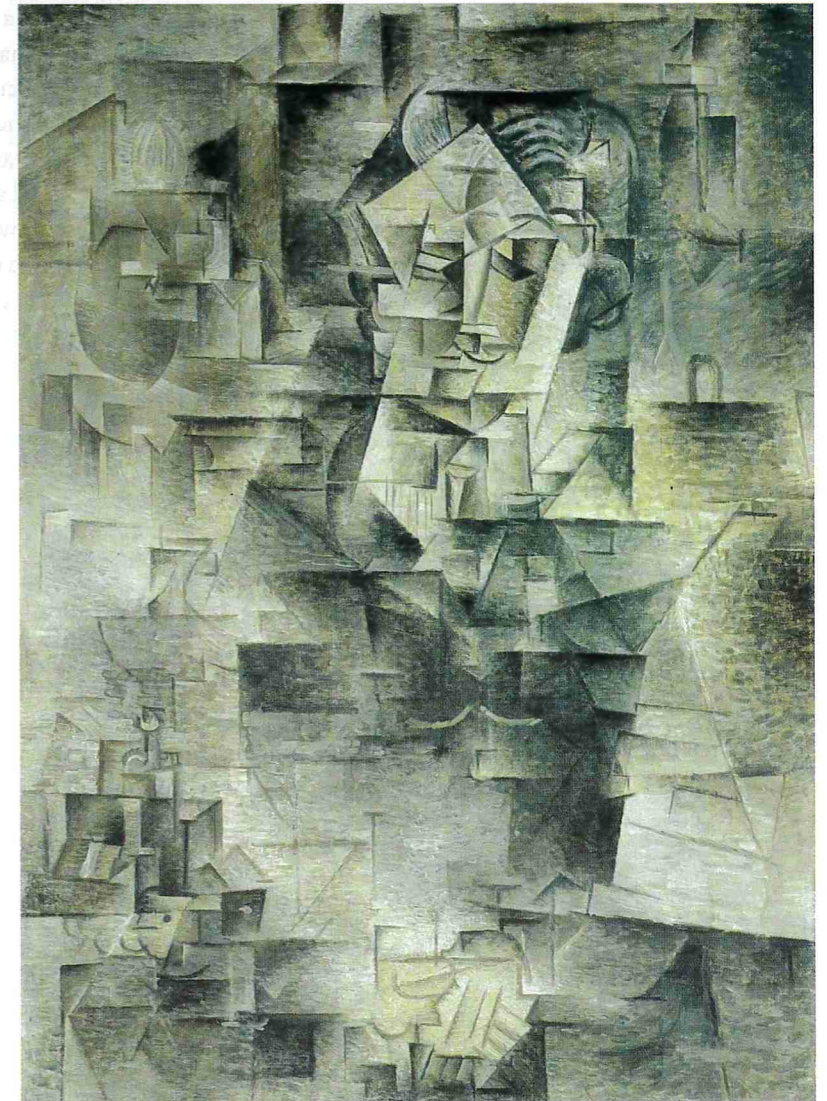
Portraiture can also be distinguished from other art categories such as history, landscape, and still life by its relationship with likeness. All portraits show a distorted, ideal, or partial view of the sitter, but portraiture as a genre is historically tied to the idea of mimesis, or likeness. Portraiture's putative association with copying and imitation has often caused the art form to be dismissed or to suffer from a low status. An emphasis on the need for the creative artist to invent and represent ideal images lingered from Renaissance art theory to the early nineteenth century and served to relegate portraiture to the level of a mechanical exercise, rather than a fine art. Michelangelo's famous protest that he would not paint portraits because there were not enough ideally beautiful models² is only one example of a dismissive attitude to portraiture that persisted among professional artists—even those who, ironically, made their living from portraiture. The tendency to undermine the practice of portraiture prevailed in the period of modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the rhetoric of avant-garde experimentation led to a valuing of abstraction over mimesis. However, such artists, from many different countries, continued to practise portraiture—despite their theoretical objections. For example, Picasso built his early reputation on Cubist still-life painting, but some of his most effective early experiments in this new style were his portraits of the art dealers, such as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler [2]. Picasso has provided enough detail in this portrait to distinguish the features of his sitter. Unlike some of his other Cubist works, such as his many still lifes, the subject here remains legible and distinctive, despite the fragmentation of the form of the face.

The low status of the mimetic art of portraiture was belied in other ways. When the French Royal Academy codified a hierarchy of artistic genres in the seventeenth century, portraiture was placed second after history painting. The idea here was that portraits should represent only the most important people and/or those who had distinguished themselves by virtue or heroism, so portraiture was considered to be an alternative to history painting in providing models of emulation for the spectator. The disdain for portraiture that seemed to accompany early twentieth-century abstraction was transformed to fascination after the Second World War, when portraiture took centre stage in the experi-

2 Pablo Picasso

Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, 1910

Kahnweiler was an art dealer who was largely responsible for handling the market for Picasso's early Cubist work, thus protecting the artist from the need to exhibit and promote his experimental paintings on his own initiative. Picasso's decision to represent Kahnweiler in his innovative Cubist style was therefore an apt homage to a supporter of the avant-garde, but it was also part of a tendency among avant-garde artists to produce portraits of prominent art dealers who helped foster their careers.



mental practice of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Jo Spence, and Cindy Sherman. Thus portraiture's prevailing association with mimesis had both a negative and a positive effect on the reputation of the genre.

A final way in which portraiture is unique is in the diversity of its forms and functions. Perhaps more than any other art form, portraiture comes in a variety of media. Portraits can be paintings, sculptures, drawings, engravings, photographs, coins, medals. They can appear as images in newspapers or magazines or on mosaics, pottery, tapestry, or bank notes. In ancient Peru, portrait jars were common, while in eighteenth-century England there was a brief vogue for portraits woven from hair. Portraits can show individuals or groups in different ways, either partially or minimally, as busts or silhouettes, or full-length in a well-defined setting. Portraits can also be found in a range of contexts

and locations: they share with other genres a place in galleries and private homes, but they can also be held in the hand (for example coins), worn as lockets (miniatures), displayed as garden decorations (busts) or public monuments. Each of these settings endows the portrait with a different kind of significance. The all-pervasiveness of portraiture means that it is perhaps the most familiar of all art forms. For example, the least-educated slave in ancient Greece would have recognized Alexander the Great's visage on a coin or on an equestrian monument; mugs with the faces of famous politicians were common in the lowliest eighteenth-century English, French, and American taverns; in the twenty-first century, even those without knowledge of art might have a mantelpiece or desk full of formal portrait photographs of family members. The functional aspects of portraiture, and its use-value, familiarity, and popularity arise in part from the indeterminacy of portraits. They appear to have the tangibility of a document or a fact, but these specifics are inevitably partial and mediated, and subject to the contexts of their production, display, and reception.

In each of these ways, portraiture is a unique art category. However, there are two prevailing stereotypes about portraiture in general that are worth investigating before the genre is considered in detail. The first of these is that portraiture was an invention of the Renaissance; the second is that portraiture is a predominantly Western art form. While the first of these assertions can be refuted, the second is arguably true. It is certainly correct to say that before the fifteenth century, the practice of commissioned painted portraits of individual sitters was rare. Nevertheless, there is evidence that portraiture existed as early as the neolithic period, when Polynesian skull cults privileged the individualized head. By 5000 BC, skulls were modelled out of clay in Jericho.³ The ancient world was replete with portraits: in Greece they usually represented prominent people and took the form of tomb sculpture or public statues; and in Rome the individualized portrait bust became an important object in the private home. Portraiture is mentioned by such ancient writers as Pliny the Elder, Aristotle, Xenophon, Plato, Cicero, Quintilian, and Horace. Some of the most effective portraits in history were produced in the Fayum district of Roman Egypt from the first to second century AD [3]. Although little portraiture remains from the medieval period, there are some notable exceptions in the form of tomb sculpture and portraits of emperors, such as the monumental mosaic figures from the first half of the sixth century of the Emperor and Empress Justinian and Theodora at the church of San Vitale in Ravenna [4].

The fifteenth century is a significant turning point in the history of portraiture as it represented the beginning of a professionalization of European portrait painting. In both Italy and the Netherlands, individual likenesses first appeared as donors in religious paintings, such

4 Anonymous

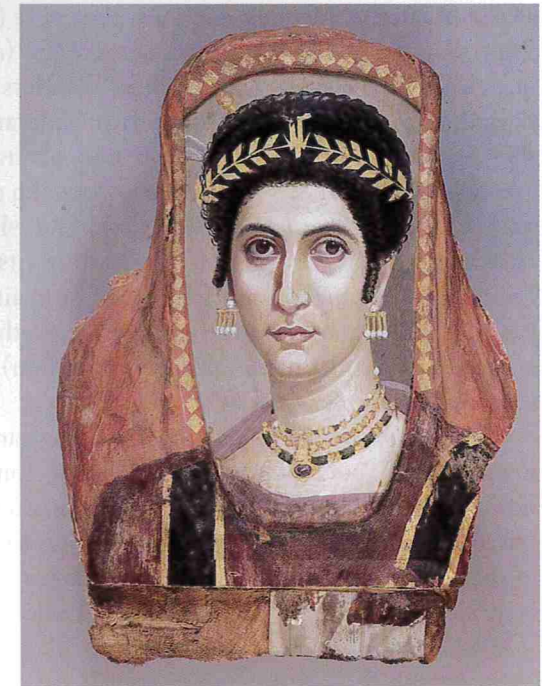
Justinian I, c.546–8

This mosaic is one of a series that forms the decorative scheme of the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. Most of the series is devoted to the life of Christ, but it also includes this portrait of Justinian. This portrait evinces both the stylized manner of sixth-century Byzantine art and a clear use of imperial symbolism. Justinian was one of the earliest Roman emperors to support Christianity wholeheartedly, and it is notable that the formal robes he wears in the mosaic echo those of the garments worn by Christ in the mosaic on the opposite wall.

3 Anonymous

'Isidora': Portrait of a Woman, AD 100–110

This is an example of one of the Fayum portraits, produced in the first to second century AD in Roman Egypt. A number of these highly naturalistic portraits appeared on mummy cases. The portraits may have been painted retrospectively, but it is also possible that they were produced before the death of the individual represented. They were most likely carried in funeral processions. In the first century AD the Fayum was populated by a mix of races, including Romans (who ruled), Egyptians, and Greeks. The combination of cultural influences from these different civilizations may have inspired the unique combination of naturalism and ritual function in their portraiture.



as the Master of Flémalle's *Merode Altarpiece* (c.1425) and Masaccio's *Trinity* in Santa Maria Novella, Florence (c.1427). In subsequent decades, artists such as Van Eyck in Flanders and Pisanello in Italy began to produce free-standing portraits of named individuals. From these early beginnings, sixteenth-century portrait practice exemplified greater diversity: sitters began being placed in detailed settings, as we have seen in Holbein's *George Gisz* [1]; full-length figures replaced half-length figures as the norm, as in portraits of the nobility by the Italian artist Bronzino; the subjects of portraits became increasingly varied, including court dwarfs, tailors, and other tradesmen (notably appearing in works by Velázquez and Titian), as well as monarchs, courtiers, and ecclesiasts.

Evidence of an increasing artistic interest can be found in the growing presence of portraiture within art theory from the sixteenth century. Francisco de Holanda's Portuguese treatise on portraiture of 1548 was translated into Spanish in 1563 and represents the first full consideration of the genre. More famously, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) in Italy devoted a whole section to his *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* (*Treatise on the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*) of 1584 to portraiture, and in England, Nicholas Hilliard's *The Arte of Limning* was written between 1598 and 1603, although not published until the twentieth century. Portraiture also became the subject of religious controversy after the Council of Trent (1545–63) examined the place of art in the Church as part of its revision of Catholic theory and practice. The Bolognese bishop Gabriele Paleotti in 1582 devoted sections of his celebrated *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (*Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*) to a consideration of acceptable and unacceptable aspects of portraiture.

These changes accompanied the greater professionalization of portrait painters. By the sixteenth century, there were some artists who were portrait specialists, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became common practice in Europe, and later America, for itinerant portrait painters outside the metropolis to travel from town to town or house to house offering their services. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many artists gained reputation and fortune primarily through the practice of portraiture. Artists, as well as sitters, recognized the publicity value of showing portraits at public exhibitions, and further notoriety could be gained from portraits that were stylistically daring, grandiose, or offered subtle insights into the character of the sitter. The American artists Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent, and the French painter Degas, were among many artists in the nineteenth century whose exhibited portraits evinced such striking qualities.

As portraiture became more of a professional specialized practice, the range of sitters became more diverse, and by the end of the nine-

teenth century portrait painters began experimenting more frequently with new ways of evoking the personality, status, or profession of their sitters. While conventional, formal, commissioned portraiture has remained popular to the present day, artists have also produced portraits to explore their own psyches, represent their intimate circles, or serve as manifestos of artistic style or purpose.

There is no doubt that this widespread practice of portraiture can be dated to the Renaissance, although its origins are earlier. However, another common conception is that portraiture is a largely Western phenomenon, and this is more difficult to refute. Certainly, there are portraits from non-Western countries, such as China, where a portrait tradition can be traced back to the Han dynasty in 200 BC,⁴ or India, where a special form of portrait miniature painting was associated with the Mughal dynasty of the seventeenth century. However, as portraiture represents specific people, its practice tends to flourish in cultures that privilege the notion of the individual over that of the collective.⁵ As Stephen Greenblatt has shown, the Renaissance in western Europe was a period of increased self-consciousness, in which concepts of unique individual identity began to be verbalized.⁶ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these considerations were enhanced by the rapid development of the genres of biography and autobiography, and by increasingly articulated ideas about character and personality. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new developments in the science of psychology led to deeper explorations of individuality and personality. This historical trajectory encompasses the flourishing of portraiture as an important artistic practice and cultural commodity.

In many non-European cultures, this probing of the nature of the individual is either non-existent or has not developed in the same way. For example, a great deal of the art of African tribal cultures is based on masks [5], but the mask is stylized and functions to represent personhood rather than a particular person. Furthermore, in traditional Jewish and Islamic cultures a prohibition on imagery has made portraiture a taboo in a large part of the non-Christian world. The assigning of a specific identity to a represented face and body is thus a strongly Western phenomenon. Deleuze and Guattari's reference to the 'faciality' of Western culture signifies the obsessive concern of the West for the face as a signifier, but also what they see as a Western illusion of individual subjectivity.⁷ The very idea of individuality is thus socially and historically constructed and contingent, and portraiture both grows from and reinforces this particularly Western concept. A study of world portraiture could be valuable, but in a book of this nature it would falsely elide a range of discrete cultural phenomena. This book is therefore concerned largely with Europe and North America, where individual identity and the possibilities of its representation are most fully explored through the artistic category of portraiture.



5 Anonymous

Grebo Mask, date unknown

Masks fulfilled a variety of ritual purposes in different African ethnic groups. Among these functions, a mask could be considered a substitute for a spirit or dead ancestor; thus it could have the portrait-like quality of acting as a manifestation of a specific individual. However, masks were also used in performances as part of religious rituals; the power of the mask was thus seen to supersede the person or type it was meant to represent. This mask has been identified as originating with the Grebo peoples of what is now modern Liberia. The Grebo was both a linguistic and ethnic group, which specialized in grotesque masks such as this one.

Although the practice of portraiture is ubiquitous in the West, the distinct artistic histories and social and political developments of different countries have led to variations in the ways portraits have been used and the extent of their popularity. For example, while autonomous portrait painting appeared simultaneously in Italy and Flanders in the fifteenth century, artists in Italy idealized the features of their sitters more frequently than Flemish artists. Portraiture in England and Holland has played a fundamental role in their histories and artistic identities, and thus portraits from these countries have a prominent place in this book. In the seventeenth century trends in court portraiture varied in Spain, the German states, and England, although in all of these countries portraits served the purpose of glorifying the monarch. This book will note these distinctions in specific cases, but the focus here will be on how the portraits discussed engage with shared themes.

Although this book is organized in a broadly chronological shape, the focus of each chapter is thematic. Of major concern throughout the history of portraiture are the purposes portraits were intended to serve and how they answered those purposes in terms of style, media, sites of display, and presentation of facial expression, gesture, dress, and setting. The ways portraitists negotiated the problems of representing identity, and the role of the portrait as both a mode of representation and as a functional object will be the principal concerns of this book.