‘Portraiture’ by **Shearer West**

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“All portraits show a distorted, ideal or partial iew of the sitter, but portraiture as a genre is historically tied to the idea of mimesis or likeness.”

**Michelangelo**’s famous protest was that he would not paint portraits because there were not enough ideally beautiful models (according to **Vasari** ‘Lives of the Artists’)

There are two prevailing stereotypes about portraiture in general that are worth investigating before the genre is considered in detail.

1. That portraiture was an invention of the Renaissance: NOT TRUE (eg Classical)
2. That portraiture is predominantly a Western art form. MORE TRUE

15th century can be seen as a significant turning point in the history of portraiture as it represented the beginning of a professionalisation of European portrait painting. In both Italy and the Netherlands, individual likenesses first appeared as donors in religious paintings…

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 of purpose.

As portraiture represents specific people, its practice tends to flourish in cultures that privilege the notion of the individual over the collective. The Renaissance led to a period of increased self-consciousness, in which concepts of unique individual identity began to be verbalised. In the 17th and 18th 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 19th and 20th centuries, new developments in the science of psychology led to deeper explorations of individuality and personality. On the other hand, much African art is based on the stylised mask which functions to represent personhood rather than a particular person. Furthermore in traditional Jewish and Islamic cultures, portraiture is often taboo.

All portraits involve a series of negotiations – often between the artist and the sitter, but sometimes there is also a patron who is not included in the portrait itself.

**Bernard Berenson** distinguishes between ‘portrait’ and ‘effigy’ – the former representing the likeness of the individual and the latter an individual’s social role.

**Edwin Panofsky** claims the aims of the portrait are twofold: “on the one hand it seeks to bring ot whatever it is in which the sitter differs from the rest of humanity and…., on the other hand, it seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity…. regardless of place and time.”

Although portraits convey the likeness of an individual, they can also demonstrate the imagination of the artist, the perceived social role of the sitter and the qualities of the sitter that raise him or her above the occasion of the moment….. In these respects, portraits become less about likeness and more about the typical the conventional or the ideal.

French 19th century portraits of women showed social conventions in the inclusion of fans. *(Relate to Mme Matisse in a Hat)*

The concept of identity has a complex history. The 21st century notion of identity as those aspects of character, gender, race and sexual orientation unique to an individual is the legacy of the 17th century when the idea of ‘the self’ began to be explored philosophically. Previously, identity was seen to be rooted in those external attributes, conveyed through the body, face and deportment, that distinguished one individual from another. Portraits are filled with the external signs of a person’s socialised self, what **Erving Goffman** referred to as the “front” of an individual.

Expression in portraiture could give the sitter an appearance of madness or ugliness, it was also associated with the less exalted art of caricature.

It is important to remember that ideas of character, personality and psychology have evolved through time.

**Panofsky** argued that the Arnolfini Portrait was a record of a marriage ceremony (in 1934). He argued that as one of the first free standing whole length double portraits, their hand gestures and symbolic props suggested they were engaged in some sort of ceremony or ritual; he was convinced by the inscription on the ‘back wall’ “Jan Van Eyck fuit hic” (Jan Van Eyck was here) suggesting that the artist was a witness.

David Piper on he other hand talks about the direct relationship between portraits and tomb sculptures as “the painted portrait may often seem to be but a domesticated tomb effigy”. *(NB he is not talking about the Arnolfini Portrait here, but this could work as a convincing argument I think?)*

Marc Quinn says of his portrait of Sir John Sulston for the National Portrait Gallery (that is a display of a DNA culture taken from the genetic scientist) that it “is the most realistic portrait in the gallery”.

RRR Smith argues that the word ‘propaganda’ is misleading in the description of ancient portraiture, because it has negative associations of coercion but these works were actually intended “to provide reassuring images of authority”. Copies of these works could not only remind the viewer of a ruler’s appearance but could also spread that likeness everywhere and give a sense of omnipresence. *(eg Augustus of Prima Porta)*

In considering the history of portraiture in relation to the subject of gender, the gender of both artist and sitter needs to be taken into account.

Because self portraits merge the artist and the sitter into one, they have the quality of private diary, in that they seem to give us an artist’s insight into his or her own personality…. However, they have also been used as signatures, advertisements and as experiments in technique or expression.

Kahlo’s self portraits have elements of both autobiography and psychoanalytic self-exploration… Her deeply personal self-portraits turn these real life events (back operations, miscarriages, travels etc) into metaphorical and fantastical realisations of her own physical and psychological pain.