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Why Contemporary Portraiture Shouldn't Show Its Face

Sharon Knettell · Wednesday, April 24th, 2013

So you have decided to have a portrait commissioned, say of your child or lovely wife. Maybe you are a big deal corporate executive, politician or president of an exclusive club. The one thing you will all have in common is that for the most part, your precious portrait will be worth less than you paid for it as soon as you sign the check and will depreciate faster than a new car.

The wretched, uninspired state of current day portraiture is painfully brought home when compared to the ravishing portraits on view in the hit BBC series "Downton Abbey" – actually Highclere Castle. It is filled with almost an inestimable fortune of paintings, many done in the grand manner, three by Van Dyck alone. The dining room presided over by Van Dyck's magnificent equestrian portrait of King Charles the 1st. Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds show up in the scenes as well.

Van Dyck's portrait of King Charles I

There are few great portraitists out there presently, but surely no John Singer Sargents. If you don't know who he is, you are better off going to a photography studio, because ignorance in this field is a ticket to a spectacularly bad portrait.

Here is a bit of background, coming from personal experience as well as knowledge gleaned from 50 years being an artist, proficient in several fields. I went to The Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1960 specifically to learn to be a portrait artist; I was 17. The school was known for its graduates who formed "The Boston School." These were figurative and portrait artists of the highest caliber. Their art is in museums and some of the paintings are priceless. They include William McGregor Paxton, Frank W. Benson, Edmund Tarbell, Polly Thayer Starr, and Joseph de Camp.

These were the last of the great American portrait painters. They taught as well as painted portraits and they painted them from life. You sat. Now the majority are painted from photographs.

After the early part of the 20th century most of the art schools in America and Europe dismantled their classical training classes. It became an express-yourself free for all. If you said it was art, then it was art; that was the cry of Marcel Duchamp from his urinal. By the time this perplexed 17-year-old arrived at the Boston Museum School, the figure drawing classes were unattended by any instructors. We students then moved on to still-lifes – artful piles of junk to be interpreted as we wished – and still no instructor. Our 'portrait class' consisted of a women in a pink dress, sitting in a chair, still no instructor. There were no clues on how to mix skin tones or even how to do basic oil painting. Oops, we had one class where we learned how to mix sand into paint. This sorry state was repeated in most of the major and minor art schools in America and on the Continent. Even a degree from a supposedly august institution like the Rhode Island School of Design will not

guarantee you an excellent portraitist, as the thrust of the painting majors is abstract expressionism and theoretical painting The last time I looked they had no courses dealing with portraiture.

There was one artist in Boston, still clinging to the last remnants of classical realism in Boston, R. H. Ives Gammell. Ives Gammell was from a rich Providence, R.I., family and arrived at the Boston Museum School with his manservant in the early part of the 20th century. As a devotee of the French Academic Style, he was dismayed and embittered to see the trends of the 20th century pass him by. He opened an atelier on Newbury St. (ironically I trudged past it every day to go to the Museum School), one of the few places still available to learn classical realism. This was true for almost 40 years. One of his students, Richard Lack, opened his own atelier and his students opened theirs. The Art Renewal Center has a list of ateliers and classically trained painters called “living masters.”

Many contemporary ‘portraitists’ have no training whatsoever. Why should they, when an all too common practice is to project or trace a large photo-shopped photo-print and transfer it to a canvas? Usually a transparent piece of plastic is put over the print, so the skin-tones can be mixed right on the photograph and then filled in like number-paintings on the canvas. (Contemporary clients are so ignorant of what really constitutes good painting that they are easily thrilled if their image looks just like the photograph.) You can actually have this same process done cheaper in China if all you really want is a hand painted photograph, not a work of art.

Getting someone classically trained is not a panacea. A good deal of them, in my opinion, have not gone beyond the academic restrictions of their training and repeat trite themes ad nauseum. If it is a politician or a judge, should the flag to be to the left or the right? Should our noble representative be perched on white marble steps under a gaudy blue sky, with a fluttering flag? Spare me those thousands of dull lawyer paintings, all surrounded with amazing originality with law books. Let us not forget the doctors with a stethoscope peeking shyly from their breast pocket. Not one of them is as powerful as Eakins’ “The Gross Clinic.” Now there’s a painting worth having.

Thomas Eakins, The Gross Clinic

Clients are a major part of the problem. They often treat the artist no better than a servant, hired out to paint the client’s preconceived image. Most have little knowledge of art and want as little involvement and inconvenience as possible. Often they will grant the poor soul sometimes as little half an hour to take pictures and expect a museum piece. As a result most portraitists will paint anything the client wants, as they have families and bills. One reasonably decent painter showed me an old, very lucrative family portrait commission. The setting was modern but the subjects were decked out in Victorian clothing. The client’s ostentatious mansion was moved for this oeuvre from its original place to make a backdrop behind the family. I asked him how he could have managed to paint such a horror; it was truly a hilarious painting. He said, “One hundred thousand dollars, it paid for my house, studio and farm.”

Even extreme wealth cannot protect you against a wretched portrait. Bill and Melissa Gates’ portrait looks like a finely rendered ad for computer equipment. I believe they gave the artist one hour for a photo-shoot.

The last really great portrait of an American President was by John Singer Sargent of Teddy Roosevelt.

John Singer Sargent, President Theodore Roosevelt

Compare this with the latest wooden portraits of George W. Bush by John Howard Sanden and that of

Bill Clinton's, by Simmie Knox.

Simmie Knox, President William Jefferson Clinton

The White House actually has some really beautiful portrait as this government site reveals (http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/inside-white-house/art) – which makes these contemporary efforts look rather banal in comparison.

The Brits, even though they cling to some of the old ways, especially in regard to sittings don't take a back seat to the Americans in turning out world class clunkers. The recent flap over the Kate Middleton portrait by Paul Emsley and the dreary Dame Maggie Smith's portrait by James Lloyd #15 jpg are cases in point.

Paul Emsley, Lady Kate Middleton

The floor in the Maggie Smith portrait was obviously of more interest to the painter than her dully painted face. This is a sad comedown from the glories of the English portraiture of the Rococo; namely masters like Sir Thomas Lawrence and Sir Thomas Gainsborough- known respectively for "Pinky" and "Blue Boy."

James Lloyd, Dame Maggie Smith

How far the quality of English portraiture has fallen is obvious when you compare Kate's portrait to that of Gainsborough's Mrs. Thomas Graham and, even though he is Italian, Pietro Annigoni's magnificent young Queen Elizabeth.

Pietro Annigoni, Queen Elizabeth II

Queen Elizabeth was tutored in the arts by her very knowledgeable grandmother, Queen Mary. However, as Jane Burchill, a well-known British writer put it, "Kate Middleton studied history of art at university — the modern equivalent of flower arranging for girls whose mothers are keen for them to marry well."

Queen Elizabeth has always sat for all her painted portraits, more than one hundred of them. Kate Middleton's portrait was copied meticulously from a photograph.

If you want a portrait which will not be rolled up in the attic by your children, you have to do some homework. The best thing is to become an art connoisseur, learn about painting. Go to museums; immerse yourself in good art to develop an eye. Visit the studio of artists that you admire. Sometimes really good figurative artists, classically trained or not, will paint your portrait, even if they don't advertise it. If you like their paintings, trust their judgment, don't micromanage the painting, and you will get the best from them.

If you want a grand portrait, be prepared to sit. And sit. While the artist works. If not, go to a photographer.

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