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# What Is a Portrait?

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Although the meaning of the term ‘portraiture’ may appear to be self-evident, there is often only a fine distinction between objects that could be considered portraits and those that are best classified differently. Usually a portrait is a work of art that represents a unique individual, but this simple definition belies the complexity and contradictions of portraiture. While a portrait can be concerned with likeness as contained in a person’s physical features, it can also represent the subject’s social position or ‘inner life’, such as their character or virtues. A portrait can be subject to social or artistic conventions that construct the sitter as a type of their time; it can also probe the uniqueness of an individual in a way that sets the sitter apart from his or her context. Portraiture’s capacity to do all these things at once makes it such a powerful form of representation.

In attempting to unpick the complexities of portraiture, it is useful to consider three factors: first of all, portraits can be placed on a continuum between the specificity of likeness and the generality of type, showing specific and distinctive aspects of the sitter as well as the more generic qualities valued in the sitter’s social milieu. Secondly, all portraits represent something about the body and face, on the one hand, and the soul, character, or virtues of the sitter, on the other. These first two aspects relate to portraiture as a form of representation, but a third consideration is concerned more with the processes of commissioning and production. 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. The impact of these negotiations on the practice of portraiture must also be addressed.

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### 6 Giuseppe Arcimboldo

#### *Fire*, 1566

Arcimboldo was from Milan, but he made his reputation in the courts of Emperors Ferdinand I of Vienna and Rudolf II of Prague. Although known for his religious works, he was hired at the court of Vienna as a portraitist. Few of his straightforward portraits survive, and he became better known for composite heads such as this one, which use inanimate objects to achieve a portrait-like quality. From the contemporary poems of Giovanni Battista Fontana, who also worked in Vienna, we know that Arcimboldo’s heads were allegories of imperial authority, and they were valued for their humorous *double entendre*.

### Likeness and type

The etymology of the term ‘portraiture’ indicates the genre’s association with likeness and mimesis. Portraiture expresses the likeness of a particular individual, but that likeness is conceived to be a copy or duplication of his or her external features. Some artists took a literal approach to the idea of copying a likeness. In ancient Rome the common practice of using death masks allowed facial features to be

reproduced with exactitude, as did some subsequent western European artists. For example, the fifteenth-century Italian artist Verrocchio and the nineteenth-century American artist Gilbert Stuart took life masks of their subjects to enhance the verisimilitude of their portraits. After the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, artists such as Degas in France employed photographs to help them achieve as exact a likeness as possible. The ability to reproduce recognizable and lifelike features was considered to be a valuable asset to portraitists, although they could also be condemned for what was perceived to be a slavish imitation of reality.

However, likeness is not a stable concept. What might be considered a 'faithful' reproduction of features relates to aesthetic conventions and social expectations of a particular time and place. Different approaches to likeness can also be taken by artists working within the same context and conditions. An observation of any two portraits of the same individual by different artists reveals just how unstable ideas of likeness can be. In fifteenth-century Flanders, where close observation of the material world was appreciated, both Jan Van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden painted portraits of the same individual, Nicolas Rolin, who held a major political administrative role as Chancellor of Burgundy [7

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**7 Jan Van Eyck**

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*Madonna with Chancellor Rolin, c.1433*

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Rolin was a powerful figure in the court of Philip the Good, the Duke of Burgundy. This altarpiece, representing Rolin, not only demonstrates Van Eyck's skill as a portraitist but also reveals his versatility both in its detailed rendering of symbolic detail and in the precisely delineated townscape seen through the arcade in the background.



## 8 Rogier van der Weyden

*The Donor, Chancellor Rolin, Kneeling in Prayer*, from the reverse of the *Last Judgement Polyptych*, c.1445–50

Portraits of donors, or individuals who 'donated' works of art to churches, were common features of altarpieces in fifteenth-century Italy and the Low Countries. There were different conventions for including donor portraits within altarpieces. Van Eyck placed Chancellor Rolin within the same panel as the Virgin and Child, whereas Rogier van der Weyden chose the more common practice of placing his portraits on separate panels in his Last Judgement altarpiece at the Hôtel Dieu in Beaune. Rolin is shown here on the lower left outer panel. The outside panels of altarpieces were often sombre and blandly coloured like this one, in contrast to the open altarpiece, which was lavishly coloured and reserved for masses and feast days. The portraits here would have been visible when the altarpiece was closed.



and 8]. A comparison between the two portraits shows the same fleshy lips, prominent chin, and slim tapered ear. It is clear we are looking at two versions of a single person. However, Van Eyck's Chancellor has a dignity of expression and seriousness of demeanour that is lacking in the frail and sadder image of Rogier van der Weyden's Rolin. Part of this difference could be attributed to the age of the sitter: Van Eyck's *Madonna with Chancellor Rolin* was painted in the 1430s, at least a decade before van der Weyden's version. However, Rolin was already in his sixties when Van Eyck painted his portrait, so in both instances, it is an elderly man being portrayed. It is more likely that the different decisions made by these artists could have been inspired by the diverse purposes for which these portraits were produced. Although both works are altarpieces, Van Eyck's bold Chancellor, who visually holds an equal status to the Virgin, may have been painted for Rolin's son, the Bishop of Autun Cathedral. Van der Weyden's portrait was only a single panel in a polyptych (multi-panelled altarpiece) on the theme of the Last Judgement donated by Rolin to the chapel of a hospital in the



Flemish town of Beaune. The difference between an arrogant Rolin and a humble one is stressed through the way each artist has suited his altarpiece to the purpose for which it was intended—the first a context of family power, and the second a place of disease and death. While the function of these two portraits may have dictated different approaches to likeness, the individual style of the artists who produced them can also account for their differences. Van Eyck was known for his microscopic and penetrating analysis of facial features and van der Weyden's portraits were more stylized and less detailed.<sup>1</sup> Thus both works are likenesses, but the likenesses are mediated by the varying functions of the portraits and the distinct styles of the artists.

Thus the drive for likeness in much portraiture must be balanced against the limitations of representation, which can only offer a partial, abstracted, generic, or idealized view of any sitter. Many writers have drawn attention to the duality of portraiture—its simultaneous engagement with likeness and type. Bernard Berenson famously distinguished between 'portrait' and 'effigy'—the former representing the likeness of an individual and the latter an individual's social role.<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky provided one of the most concise statements about portraiture's dualism:

A portrait aims by definition at two essentials . . . On the one hand it seeks to bring out whatever it is in which the sitter differs from the rest of humanity and would even differ from himself were he portrayed at a different moment or in a different situation; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from an 'ideal' figure or 'type'. On the other hand it seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity and what remains in him regardless of place and time; and this is what distinguishes a portrait from a figure forming part of a genre painting or narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Although portraits convey a likeness of an individual, they also can 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. Furthermore, portraits can reflect conventions of behaviour or art practices that originate in the sitter's social and cultural milieu. In these respects, portraits become less about likeness and more about the typical, the conventional, or the ideal.

These ambivalent qualities of portraiture may explain why, for example, it was common practice in the sixteenth century for artists to paint portraits of sitters they had not seen for some time or, indeed, had never seen. In the 1530s Isabella d'Este most famously asked Titian to paint her portrait, but instead of sitting for him, she sent him a portrait by Francesco Francia to copy. Francia's portrait had itself been copied from another portrait 25 years previously. Thus Titian's portrait was a copy of a copy, without direct reference to the real age and appearance of the sitter who commissioned it. The ideal qualities of the sitter were what concerned Lomazzo in his art treatise of 1584, in which he advised

that only worthy, virtuous, or high-born individuals should be the subjects of portraits. Lomazzo's implication was that by merely representing a likeness of a worthy individual the artist would somehow absorb and reproduce their virtuous qualities for the edification of the viewer.<sup>4</sup>

Generic qualities attributed to a sitter could be conveyed through gesture, expression, or role-play; artists also used props as clues to a sitter's worth. A monarch could be represented with robes of state; a landed family could be shown sitting in the landscaped garden of their country seat; an individual known for learning would be shown with books or other attributes. The last is demonstrated in the German artist Johann Zoffany's portrait of Francis I surrounded by scientific instruments redolent of his fascination for natural history and Enlightenment invention [9]. Although Zoffany's portrait uses specific objects to express the interests of a particular man, some settings and accoutrements became artistic conventions. For instance, the practice of using a curtain and column in portraits may have originated in paintings of the Virgin and Child seated under an awning or draped throne. In Renaissance altarpieces of the Virgin and Child, especially those of the Low Countries, the draped awning often had a liturgical association, as it could represent the altar cloth or canopy, and, by extension, could refer to the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> These associations endowed the column and curtain with vestiges of authority, appropriated in portraits of monarchs and aristocrats. By the eighteenth century such elements commonly accompanied many portraits of sitters from several different classes of society, but by this time they functioned more frequently as often gratuitous theatrical props.

Other conventions in portraiture had social or artistic, rather than religious, origins. For example, for centuries after Raphael's famous representation of the courtier Castiglione (1514–15), portraitists adopted Raphael's half-length format with a sitter leaning on a ledge or parapet. Some eighteenth-century portraits in both England and France represented their sitters with a hand in the waistcoat pocket, but while this was a social mannerism among the elite in France, in England it was associated with portraiture, rather than actual behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Similar social conventions have been traced in the widespread inclusion of gloves and fans in French nineteenth-century portraits of women, and in the adoption of plain black tunics in seventeenth-century Flemish paintings of old men.<sup>7</sup> Each of these poses or props served as signs of the sitter's actual or desired social position, but in many cases, they became conventions of portraiture that enabled the artist to express typical qualities of the sitters concerned.

This duality of likeness and type can be traced back to the ancient world. Although archaic Greek sculptures of *kore* and *kouros* figures from before the fifth century BC are stylized and repeated, from that

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## 9 Johann Zoffany

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*Francis I, c.1770s*

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This richly detailed portrait has been identified as depicting Maria Theresa of Austria's husband—an enthusiastic supporter of Enlightenment scientific and philosophical discovery. However, Zoffany's period of employment by the Habsburg family is confined to the mid- to late 1770s, when he worked for them in Vienna and Florence, whereas Francis I died in 1765. This may therefore be a posthumous portrait, but it lacks some of the stiffness normally present in portrait likenesses copied from prints or other paintings.



time classical and Hellenistic Greek art distinguished between different individuals. Sculptures of famous philosophers and writers such as Socrates [10], Aeschylus, and Euripides can be differentiated from each other by physical features that were clearly associated with each individual. Likeness allows the viewer to see the figure as an individual, but it was also important for the Greeks to evoke virtues that transcended individuality. The portrait subject therefore became a symbol for higher human qualities. Even the Romans, whose portraiture was



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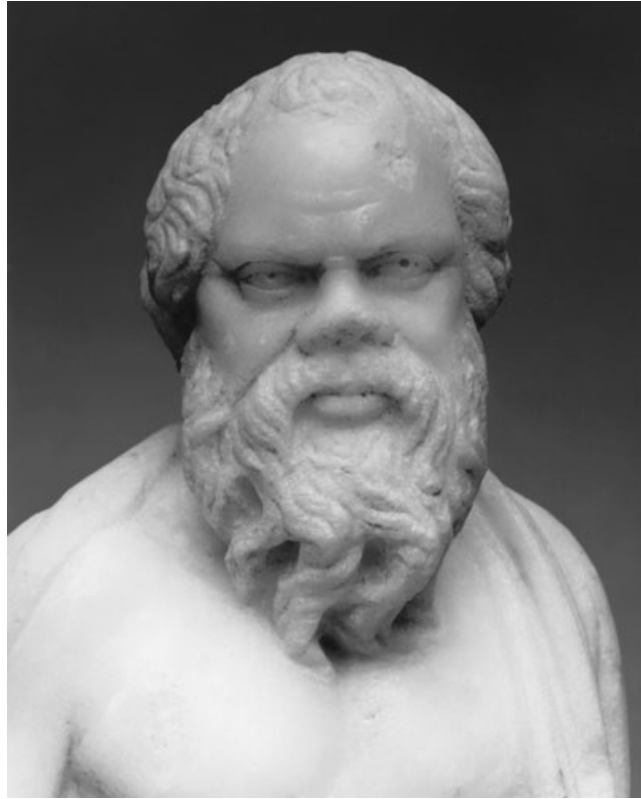
## 10 Anonymous

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### Socrates

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Ancient Greek portrait sculpture frequently represented prominent public individuals, such as philosophers (for example Demosthenes) and playwrights (for example Euripides). There are many copies of these portrait busts, and they tended—like this one—to repeat certain key features. They therefore represented individuals through typical qualities. The philosopher Socrates was known for his goat-like visage, which became the standard signal for his portrait type in Greek sculpture and later Roman copies.



more naturalistic than the Greeks, sought for the general within the particular. The widespread use of statues of Roman emperors as cult objects, for example, attested to the importance of the ideal qualities of the individual, despite the emphasis on likeness in the sculpture. Although there were both stylistic and functional differences between them, portraits in ancient Greece and Rome were therefore like enough to enable a human association with the individual depicted, but they were idealized to reflect those qualities felt to be worthy of admiration and emulation. As the Greek moralist Theophrastus wrote, ‘only a flatterer tells a man that he looks like his portrait’.<sup>8</sup>

This tension between likeness and the generic qualities of the sitter remains in some twentieth-century portraiture. A representation of a ‘rural bride’ from German photographer August Sander’s album of photographs, *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the Twentieth Century*), exemplifies how this tension can test the boundaries of portraiture [11]. Sander’s project, which he began in the mid-1920s, was conceived within the aesthetic of the *neue Sachlichkeit* or ‘New Objectivity’, which dominated German visual and literary culture at the time. It was characterized by a desire to represent reality in a sober and detached manner, and a belief that ‘objective’ representation of the world was possible. Christopher Isherwood—an English writer who lived in Berlin during this period—expressed it succinctly in the phrase: ‘I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.’<sup>9</sup> Sander intended that his photographs should represent types of people in contemporary Germany, and he divided his subjects into social categories such as farmers, craftsmen, and professions. Because

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**11 August Sander**

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***Rural Bride, 1921–2***

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During the 1920s the German August Sander attempted to use the modern technology of photography to catalogue and classify the ‘types’ of people he felt represented contemporary society. Sander began photographing peasants in Westerwald in the 1910s, and he used photographs such as this one as the starting point for his project. Sander’s conception of social types classified the rural peasantry as the ‘First People’ and the urban poor as the ‘Last People’. Although his project was based on types, it has also been called a ‘collective portrait’ of inter-war Germany.



Sander’s project was concerned with types rather than individuals, he did not identify most of his sitters by name. However, his use of real people in these professions as his subjects enhanced the unique qualities of the sitters, whose individuality undermines the idea that they stand for whole categories of people.<sup>10</sup> Sander’s works are portraits of individuals, but these portraits were conceived as representing qualities of class and profession.

The duality of likeness and type can also be investigated by looking at portraits that are accepted as faithful likenesses because they represent their sitters in an unflattering way. The portrait of an old man with a deformed nose (c.1480) by the fifteenth-century Italian artist Ghirlandaio is an early example of a work that lingers on a physical detail that would have been considered at the time as an unsightly sign of disease. Such deviations from the ideal were unusual in the Renaissance, but they became common in portraits from the nineteenth century onwards, even those representing sitters who might be expected to require a flattering likeness. For example, the New Zealand artist Oswald Birley was sought after in England by politicians, members of the royal family, and other public figures, but his portrait of Arabella Huntington [12] as stern, short-sighted, and prim suggests that visual frankness did not deter his patrons. However, there is no indication that such uncompromising views of sitters are more ‘like’ than other kinds of portraits.

Likeness is thus at best a problematic concept, and while artists



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**12 Oswald Birley**

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*Arabella Duval Huntington,*  
1924

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Although born in New Zealand, Birley was educated in England and became a fashionable society portrait painter after the First World War. He was also known for his portraits of members of the royal family and political figures such as Churchill and Eisenhower.



nearly always produce portraits with some hint at the likeness of the individual, portraits also stress the typical, conventional, or ideal aspects of their sitters. These signals emerge through pose, expression, setting, or props. Likeness is subject to the quirks of artistic style and, for the viewer, is a slippery and subjective notion. It is not possible for us to compare most portraits we see with the sitters who posed for them, and therefore our impression of likeness is one that comes through the skill of the artist in creating a believable model of a real person.

### **Body and soul**

Whether a portrait veers towards likeness or type, all portraits engage in some way with the identity of the sitter represented. The concept of identity has a complex history. The twenty-first-century notion of identity as those aspects of character, gender, race, and sexual orientation unique to an individual is the legacy of the seventeenth century, when the idea of ‘the self’ began to be explored philosophically.<sup>11</sup> Previously identity was seen to be rooted in those external attributes, conveyed through the body, face, and deportment, that distinguished one individual from another.<sup>12</sup> This earlier notion of identity is crucial to the history of portraiture. The idea that portraits should communicate something about the sitter’s psychological state or personality is a concept that evolved gradually and became common only after nineteenth-century Romanticism fuelled the idea of a personality cult, that is, a fascination with the particular qualities, idiosyncrasies, and actions of a celebrated individual. Portraits represent the external features of a

unique individual, and they also place their subjects within conventions of behaviour, dress, and deportment. All of these are fundamental components of individual identity. Portraits are filled with the external signs of a person's socialized self, what Erving Goffman referred to as the 'front' of an individual.<sup>13</sup> These external signals have been remarkably persistent in portraiture, even after ideas of character and personality were well developed. A good example of this is the series of portraits of English Grand Tourists in Rome painted by the Italian eighteenth-century artist Pompeo Batoni, such as George Gordon, Lord Haddo [13]. Batoni's portrait shows the young aristocrat standing in a cross-legged pose that was a conventional posture of politeness. He is

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### 13 Pompeo Batoni

*George Gordon, Lord Haddo,*  
1775

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Although also known for his altarpieces and other religious paintings, Batoni's reputation rested on portraits such as this one, which were produced in Rome for English Grand Tourists. The English aristocracy and gentry tended to seek portraitists, like Reynolds, who had social aspirations, and they found Batoni a sympathetic character when they were in Rome. Batoni was part of the circle of the German antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann in Rome, and he was hired as curator of the papal art collections. He endowed his portraits with the faithfully reproduced trappings of classical Rome, to the delight of his clients.



surrounded by the signs of Roman artistic greatness in the form of an antique statue, a Renaissance frieze, and a crumbling column. The Roman countryside is visible in the background. A very English hunting dog sitting at his feet reinforces these signals of Haddo's social status. As only landed men of a certain income could hunt or participate in the Grand Tour, Haddo's 'front' is represented as that of a high-born gentleman. Although Batoni attempted to convey something of the character of Haddo in his portrait, the viewer is directed to read more generic signs of status through such external attributes.

Despite the persistence of this emphasis on the external, most portraitists engage with individual identity in ways other than reproducing such social signs as physical appearance, dress, and deportment. One of the great challenges of portraiture for the artist is probing the sitter's character, personality, or individuality. Many portraits seem to do this, but the messages they send to the viewer, and the way those clues are interpreted, can vary from one period to another. There is also the problem that viewers tend to respond to the faces in portraits as they would to faces in real life, and therefore any reading of character or personality in a portrait tends to be highly subjective.

The problematic relationship between the communication of external and internal aspects of identity in portraiture can be demonstrated by comparing two sixteenth-century portraits by the Italian artists Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Lorenzo Lotto [6 and 14]. Arcimboldo's depiction of *Fire* has the format of profile portraits common to both ancient Rome and the Italian Renaissance. However, he has composed this portrait-like head from candles, kindling, embers, cannon-mouths, flints, and lamps. The viewer sees a face-like object, but is constantly forced to correct this impression by lingering over the still life. Such a work stresses the external aspects of portraiture: the viewer sees a face but not a personality. In contrast, Lotto's portrait of a young man can suggest many different things to an observer. Although the portrait is conventional in its half-length format and in the focused expression of the sitter, Lotto's emphasis on the sitter's distant gaze, slightly downward-curving mouth, and youthful features conveys a sense of either arrogance or melancholy, depending on how you wish to read it. However, Lotto himself was presenting us not with a clear view of the sitter's personality but a series of riddles about the young man's inner life. As Norbert Schneider has shown, the curtain in the background is a common emblem of concealment, and reveals a glimpse of a small oil lamp behind it. While the lamp in Arcimboldo's *Fire* becomes a physical feature, the lamp in Lotto's portrait seems to be a symbol of this individual's spiritual state, as it may allude to the passage in the Gospels which refers to 'light shining in darkness'.<sup>14</sup> In Lotto's work, we see the beginnings of what might be considered a psychological view of portraiture, but here it is a matter of symbol, suggestion,



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**14 Lorenzo Lotto*****Young Man before a White Curtain, c.1505–8***

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Lotto's contribution to the art of northern Italy included more than 40 portraits. His early works showed an affinity to the portraits of his predecessors, such as Antonello da Messina, in that they were simple half-length or bust figures. As his career developed, Lotto became known for his three-quarter-length portraits employing complex gestures and more elaborate settings. He enhanced the psychological qualities of his portraits through his use of emblems and symbols to encode aspects of the sitter's disposition and character. The meaning of many of these symbols, such as the candle glimpsed in this portrait of a young man, is no longer clear.



and riddle, rather than revelation of the character or personality of the sitter. That emphasis would come only much later.

Although it is possible to trace a gradual shift from portraits that stress identity through external signs to those that focus on character or personality, it is important to note that attempts to reconcile the inner life with the outer appearance were common from the Renaissance onwards. The mechanism for making this reconciliation was the revival of ancient treatises on physiognomy, which claimed that the face could be an index of the mind. Writings on physiognomy attributed to Aristotle became the basis for discussions of the face's meaning by authors such as Giacomo della Porta in the sixteenth century.

The best known proponent of physiognomic theory was the eighteenth-century Swiss writer Johann Caspar Lavater, whose massive three-volume *Physiognomische Fragmente* (*Fragments on Physiognomy*) of 1775–8 was translated into several languages [15]. Lavater's work argued that each facial feature could reveal something significant about the character of the person represented. Using a huge array of illustra-

**15 Johann Caspar Lavater**

Silhouettes of clerics, from *Essays on Physiognomy*, 1792

The Swiss writer Lavater was responsible for producing the first full exposition of the pseudo-science of physiognomy, or the idea that the face reveals the soul. Although this belief was an important staple of both ancient and Renaissance theory, Lavater's work evinced an Enlightenment enthusiasm for classification in his analysis of the physiognomic signs in hundreds of portraits. His *Physiognomische Fragmente* of 1775–8 was extensively illustrated with prints after famous portraits. Lavater also employed the contemporary fashion for silhouettes as a way of isolating and analysing individual profiles, as in this example.

tions—many of which were portraits—Lavater demonstrated the subtle differences between tilt of nose, size of forehead, and shape of mouth that could convey specific aspects of personality. Lavater's work also fuelled a popular fashion for the silhouette portrait, which reduced the individual likeness to a black profile outline. According to Lavater, this abstracted view of the face could reveal the attributes of individual character in its most basic form. Although Lavater's work was popular



with artists and writers, it proved to be ultimately too reductionist to be of use in portraiture.

Of more benefit to portrait painters in employing the signs of the face and body to reveal the soul were theories of deportment and expression. As with physiognomy, ideas of gesture and disposition of the body were ultimately drawn from ancient texts. Sixteenth-century Italian examples, such as that of Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528), followed the tradition of the ancient Roman orator Quintilian's ideas of rhetorical gesture. *The Courtier* instructed gentlemen on how they should deport themselves in society. Conduct manuals throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were similarly concerned with the revelatory qualities of contrived gestures. As mentioned earlier, these ideas came to portrait painting through a series of conventions of posing which could, but did not always, reflect social practice.

Theories of facial expression were also implicated in the body/soul duality of portraiture. Expression was distinguished from physiognomy: the former was about the temporary effects of the emotions on the face; the latter concerned those permanent facial features that revealed character. In the seventeenth century the French Royal Academician, Charles Le Brun, codified expressions of the passions, or emotions, such as fear, anger, and joy in his *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (*A Method to Learn to Draw the Passions*), published posthumously in 1698.<sup>15</sup> Le Brun's ideas were popularly adopted by history painters who were able to employ his more extreme expressions in paintings depicting war, death, and acts of heroism. For portrait painters Le Brun's taxonomies of expression were more problematic. It was uncommon for portraits to show any extreme expression, as neutral and studied features gave sitters an air of dignified repose or concentration. Most sitters preferred to be represented in this way, as any facial expression in a portrait could appear ugly or unnatural. As expression also could be a means of conveying character, this absence of decisive expression from much portraiture may have served a social need, but it removed a tool of communication from the artist's repertoire. Occasionally portraitists would show the sitter smiling or laughing, but this emphasized the awkwardness of an expression that could seem grotesque when shown static. Before the twentieth century, examples of extreme facial expression in portraits are rare. For example, the Austrian sculptor Franz Xavier Messerschmidt exploited the grotesque aspects of exaggerated expression in portraiture when he used Le Brun's formula in a series of self-portrait heads, but these were supposedly produced when he was succumbing to insanity [16].

In the twentieth century the power of facial expression to convey the inner life of sitters was exploited by Expressionist artists whose main goal was to convey the substance of the inner life. Richard Gerstl's *Laughing Self-portrait* [17], like his fellow Austrian Messerschmidt's



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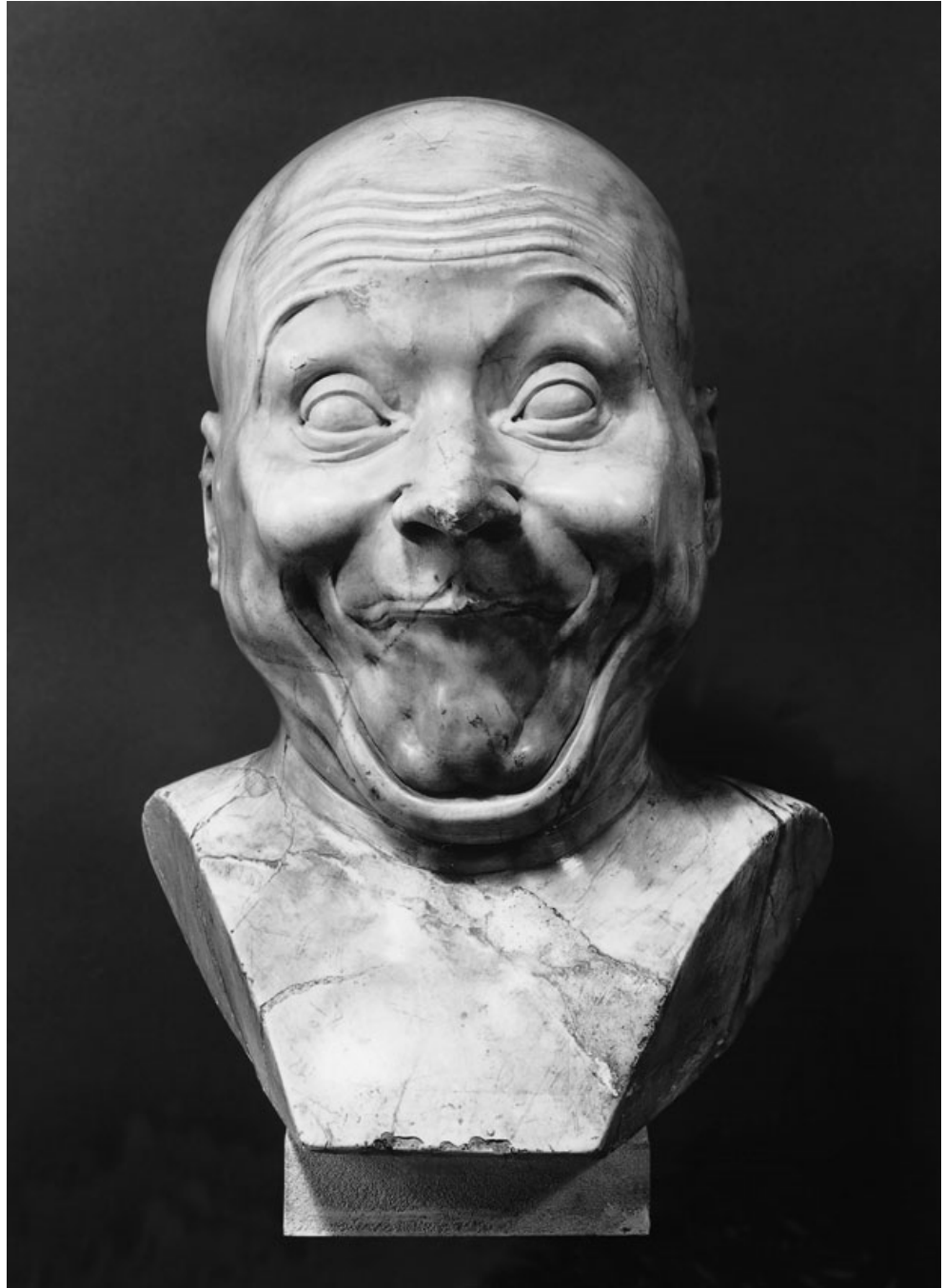
**16 Franz Xavier  
Messerschmidt**

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*An Intentional Buffoon, after  
1777*

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This is one of 43 surviving 'character' heads by the Austrian baroque sculptor Messerschmidt, who modelled these expressive heads on his own face. These works date from late in Messerschmidt's career, after a dip in his prosperity and fortune coincided with a decline into eccentric behaviour. At the height of his career he created portrait busts of Maria Theresa and Francis I, as well as completing many private commissions. From 1777 he lived at Pressburg and concentrated most of his attention on producing metal and alabaster self-portraits like this one. Sculpted self-portraits were highly unusual at this time, but apart from a reflection of his state of mind, these heads may be experiments in the *têtes d'expressions* tradition of Charles Le Brun.



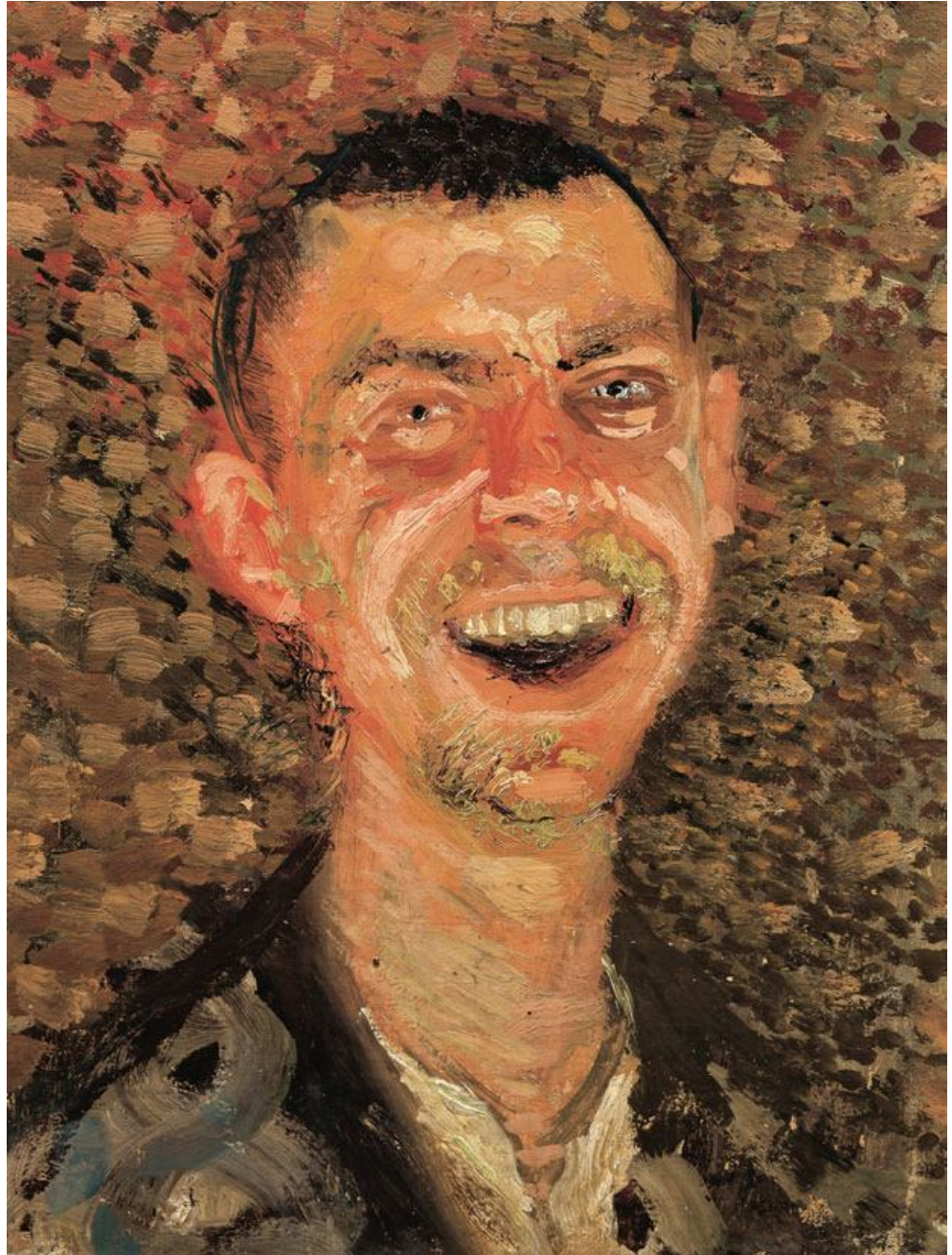
*outré* heads, has a disturbing ambience. Laughter, usually a sign of joy, here seems to be a mark of mania or despair. This kind of exaggeration was important to Expressionists in both Germany and Austria, who used a wider range of human emotion in their work as a means of tapping the spirit, soul, or psychology of their subjects.

But such decisive expression was uncommon, even in twentieth-century portraiture. While expression in portraiture could give the sitter an appearance of madness or ugliness, it was also associated with the less exalted art of caricature. From the Italian *caricare*, meaning to overload, caricature involved an exaggeration of feature, and the first examples of it can be found in the sixteenth century. Leonardo da Vinci drew caricatural heads, and Annibale Carracci reportedly justified the practice of caricature by claiming that ideal ugliness was no less

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**17 Richard Gerstl*****Laughing Self-portrait, 1908***

Very little is known about the Austrian artist Gerstl, who committed suicide at the age of 25. Many of his works were destroyed, but the majority of the surviving paintings are self-portraits. These portraits demonstrate a variety of styles, employing pointillist dots or vivid Expressionist brushwork. Gerstl's experimental self-portraits owe a great deal to Van Gogh, whose reputation as a tortured genius was fuelled by exhibitions of his work in Vienna in the early years of the twentieth century.



important a goal for artists than ideal beauty. Caricatural portraits in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, Germany, and France were often intended to satirize—through distortion of expression and feature—individuals who were politically or socially notorious. To an extent caricaturists acted as portraitists, inasmuch as they studied the distinctive features of their sitters and used them as a stamp of identification. But while the portraitist might reproduce a large nose in a way that suggests the authority or dignity of the sitter, a caricaturist would make the nose predominant to the point of being laughable. The humorous side of facial distortion, and the eventual association of this with caricature, is one of the many reasons why portraitists have generally avoided using extreme expression as a means of conveying the sitter's personality.

Portraiture is thus about both body and soul. It represents the 'front'



of a person—their gesture, expression, and manner—in such a way as to convey their distinct identity as well as to link him or her to a particular social milieu. Such external signs have remained crucial to portraitists, but from the sixteenth century onwards, artists found new means of probing the inner life of their sitters: explicitly, by employing theories of physiognomy, deportment, or expression; or more frequently implicitly, with unstable or ambiguous clues laid in the face, gesture, or accoutrements contained in the portraits. Portraits seem to present us with an individual personality, but it is important to remember that ideas of character, personality, and psychology have evolved through time. Attempts to read all portraits as embodying more than the mere externals of the sitter can be anachronistic, but by the very nature of their mimetic function, portraits give the viewer an impression of the inner life.

### **Artist, sitter, patron, and viewer**

Any definition of portraiture needs to take account of the unique interrelationship of artists, sitters, patrons, and viewers that characterizes this genre. The methods by which portraits are produced, the variables of the relationships between artist and sitter, and the way portraits seem to refer to a specific moment of production are all significant for portraiture as an art form.

One of the special aspects of portraits is that they are often based on a sitting or series of sittings, in which the subject of the portrait has physical proximity to the artist representing him or her. The same could be said for studies from the life model, so it is important to distinguish the portrait subject from the artist's model (although in some cases the boundaries between these categories are indistinct). From the foundation of art academies in sixteenth-century Italy, artists employed models as part of their education in life drawing, or to represent fictional characters in scenes from history or literature. Models were usually hired and paid by the artist or by academies, ateliers, and other training institutions, and one of their principal roles was to pose in the nude. The identity of models is therefore often unknown, and even when they can be identified, their identity was irrelevant to the purpose they served for the artist.

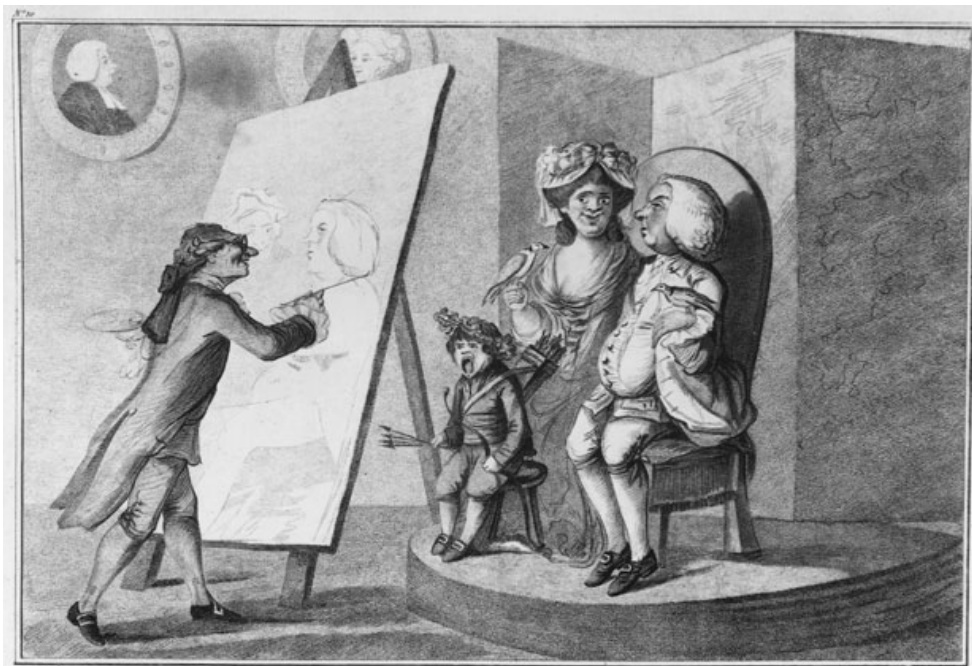
Many portraits, on the other hand, were commissioned or at least the product of negotiation between the artist, the sitter, and sometimes a patron or patrons. In contrast to the model, the identity of the sitter is fundamental to the portrait transaction. It could be said that portraits were produced with the model as the principal subject, rather than as a tool or accessory. The relationship between the portrait artist and the sitter raises a number of issues. The first of these is the extent to which the portraitist is required by social or artistic convention to flatter or



**18 William Dickinson, after  
Henry Bunbury**

*A Family Piece*, 1781

Dickinson was one of a number of printmakers who made a living in eighteenth-century London by producing mezzotint copies of famous portraits by artists like Joshua Reynolds. Dickinson was thus familiar with the contemporary practice of portraiture and the common lament that portraits were no longer restricted to a refined and powerful elite. This amusing stipple engraving, based on a design by Henry Bunbury, demonstrates the dilemma of contemporary portraitists who felt obliged to paint socially aspirant sitters (represented here as uncouth), when their preferred patrons were the gentry and aristocracy.



idealize the sitter. The process of negotiation over how the work should look could be carried on while the portrait was being produced, and it was exactly this sort of interference that led some artists to forbid the sitter to view the work until it was complete. William Dickinson's 1781 stipple engraving *A Family Piece* [18] satirizes the potential problems of an artist–sitter relationship in which the unprepossessing middle-class family is already being idealized from the first strokes of the portrait painter's brush. The eighteenth-century artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's advice to portrait painters concentrates as much on how to make aristocratic sitters feel at ease as on the technical aspects of the act of painting itself.<sup>16</sup> Vigée-Lebrun's experience indicates the extent to which the sitter's practical demands or social expectations could interfere with the creative process. The centrality of the sitter's preferences in the portrait transaction was notably challenged in much avant-garde portraiture from the late nineteenth century onwards. But as avant-garde portraits could show stylistic experimentation, bodily distortion, or human ugliness, the type of sitter represented was often a friend or admirer of the artist, rather than a formal commissioner.

This can be seen in the paintings of Lucian Freud. There is a debate about the extent to which Freud's grotesque and ungainly naked figures should be classed as portraits, as opposed to nude studies. The majority of his paintings depict nudes, and although many of these figures, such as the *Benefits Supervisor Resting* [19], are not specifically identified in the title, others are named. Freud's attention to details of facial characteristics distinguishes one likeness from another, and there is a strong sense of character in his nudes. However, he subverts the traditions of portraiture by avoiding conventional poses, displaying whole-length figures naked, stressing ugliness and extremes rather than the ideal or corrected face and body, and stripping the studio background of any

signs of the identity or status of the sitter. The *Benefits Supervisor Resting* is one such portrait: the title provides a specific occupation and putative identity for the sitter, who was Sue Tilley—an employee at the Department of Health and Social Security. However, the voluminous nudity, neutrality of the setting, and apparent obliviousness of the sitter to the presence of the artist give the work the effect of skilfully wrought painting of nudity. Most of Freud's portraits were produced with the consent and encouragement of his sitters, and through their uncompromising nudity, voyeuristic viewpoints, and lack of flattery they remind the viewer of the inevitably intimate relationship between a portraitist and a sitter.

Sometimes this kind of intimate relationship had problematic social implications. Before the eighteenth century, the majority of those who sat for portraits had a prominent position in society, the government, or the church, and artists therefore had to deal with an inequality of status between themselves and their sitter. Although artists like Titian, Van Dyck, or Velázquez received knighthoods or other royal commendations, artists were usually considered well beneath their sitters in class terms. In normal social interaction such classes did not meet, but in the portrait transaction they had to come together on quite intimate terms.

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**19 Lucian Freud**

*Benefits Supervisor Resting*,  
1994

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By his own admission Freud was attracted to sitters with 'unusual or strange proportions', and he demonstrates this interest in this portrait of the government official Sue Tilley. Tilley was initially nervous of being painted by Freud, but she gradually relaxed into the role of sitter. Her initial sittings took place on a bare wooden floor, but Freud later introduced the couch we see in this portrait.





**20 Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez**

***Las Meninas*, 1656**

This is one of the most complex and significant seventeenth-century court portraits. Velázquez produced a range of single-figure portraits for his patron Philip IV of Spain, but this unique group portrait contains several members of the royal household as well as the painter himself. A sense of informality is conveyed in the ragged arrangement in the foreground, which includes the Infanta Margarita, her court dwarf, and her maids of honour. Velázquez appears to be painting a portrait of the infanta, but in the mirror behind him we can see a reflection of King Philip and Queen Mariana who are thus the real subjects of the portrait. The reflection of the royal couple in the mirror also creates an interesting paradox for the spectator of the portrait, whose entrance into the picture is blocked by the placement of the king and queen effectively in the spectator's position. The clever and imaginative portrait allows the court painter Velázquez to have a central, even intimate, role within the royal family group.



This interaction contributed to an enhancement of the status of artists. Velázquez's numerous portraits for the court of Philip IV in the seventeenth century gave him so prominent a place in the royal household that he could include his own self-portrait as the central figure in *Las Meninas* [20]. Velázquez dominates the centre of this portrait, while the king and queen (seen in a mirror on the back wall) are symbolically and perspectively central to the composition, but physically diminutive in comparison with Velázquez. A century later, this aspect of a portrait's production also meant that artists who specialized in portraiture were sometimes required to adapt their studios to accommodate the presence of high-born or wealthy subjects. Successful artists of eighteenth-century Europe, such as Pompeo Batoni in Rome, Joshua Reynolds in England, and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in France, therefore had well-located and well-appointed studios which became fashionable outposts of society as well as workrooms.

Another point to make about the artist-sitter relationship is the potentially disruptive erotic element that could creep in. Although the portrait sitting could be a public affair, private encounters between



artist and sitter were more frequently the norm, and portraits often required male artists to stare for long periods at female sitters or—very rarely—vice versa. The most famous precedent for this sort of relationship was the ancient Greek artist Apelles, who painted a portrait of Alexander the Great's concubine Campaspe in the nude and proceeded to fall in love with her. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these relationships became the stuff of novels and anecdotal romance tales about the lives of artists. George Romney in England allegedly fell in love with the singer Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, when she sat for a series of portraits; in the mid-nineteenth century, Dante Gabriel Rossetti began an ill-fated affair with his model, Elizabeth Siddal, while he produced many portrait drawings as well as subject pictures representing her [see 96]. Erotic tension was only one possible by-product of the portrait transaction; for women artists, such as the eighteenth-century Swiss painter Angelica Kauffmann, the control of the gaze during sessions with male sitters could be socially uncomfortable but empowering.<sup>17</sup> The delicate psychological engagement between the portrait artist and the sitter was one that was potentially overcome by the invention of photography, which separated the gaze of the artist from the body of the sitter by the bulky apparatus.

The social and psychological encounters between artist and sitter that eventually become a portrait point to another factor that makes portraiture different from other art forms. Most portraiture represents a particular occasion or moment, whether directly or by implication. Unlike a landscape painting or a history painting, which may seem to transcend a single moment in time, the presence of a specific individual in a portrait reminds us of the encounter between the artist and sitter. This special aspect of portraiture has been explained using C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory of the icon, the index, and the symbol. According to Peirce, an icon looks like the thing it represents; an index draws attention to something outside the representation; and a symbol is a seemingly arbitrary sign that is, by cultural convention, connected to a particular object.<sup>18</sup> A portrait has qualities of all three: it resembles the object of representation (icon), it refers to the act of sitting (index), and it contains gestures, expressions, and props that can be read with knowledge of social and cultural conventions (symbol). In this tripartite view, the indexical qualities of portraiture are particularly notable. These signs relate to the process of producing the portrait, and the traces of that process that remain in the final product. When we look at portraits, we see individuals who are now dead or are older than and different from the way they were represented, but portraits seem to transport us into an actual moment that existed in the past when the artist and sitter encountered each other in a real time and place. Whether or not a portrait was actually based on a sitting, the transaction between artist and sitter is evoked in the imagination of the viewer.

