Engaging Faces: The Persistence of Traditional Portrait Painting Practices in a "Post-digital" Age

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Abstract: In the current global climate of contemporary art discourse, the term "post-digital" variously draws attention to the rapidly changing relationship between digital technologies, human beings, and art forms, an attitude that essentially concerns itself more with "being human" than with "being digital." While the proliferation of digital imagery—particularly depicting the human face—has become commonplace and ubiquitous to the point of becoming somewhat unremarkable, portrait painting and public demand to see the painted portrait thrive vehemently today. Significantly, and perhaps surprisingly, is the fact that the majority of portrait-painting galleries and portrait-painting prizes uphold the traditional notion that the painted portrait be painted from life; that there must be some personal human encounter between artist and sitter either during or throughout the creation of the work. This article explores the significance of the "painting from life" clause as stipulated by specific gallery and competition stakeholders and its viability as an artistic convention in a period of advanced technological opportunities. It will be shown that such a clause may in fact embody important humanising elements that make it an extremely valuable means of representation in a "post-digital" age.

Keywords: Portraiture, Painting

Introduction

The proliferation of digital photography—particularly digital photography depicting human faces—has become commonplace, ubiquitous to the point of becoming unremarkable, an everyday part of how we interact with and recognise each other. Yet despite this, or perhaps *because* of this, portrait painting and public demand to see the painted portrait continue to thrive vehemently today. Significantly, and perhaps surprisingly, most portrait-painting galleries and portrait-painting prizes continue to uphold the traditional notion that the painted portrait be painted from life; that there *must* have been a personal human encounter between artist and sitter either during or throughout the creation of the work.

This article will explore the significance of the "painting from life" clause as stipulated by specific gallery and competition stakeholders. It will also examine the clause's viability as an artistic convention in a period of advanced technological opportunities. It will be shown that such a clause may in fact embody important humanising elements that make it an extremely valuable means of representation in a "post-digital" age.

Engaging Faces

The influential philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), in reflecting on the acceptance of the societal changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, proposed that the establishment of a national portrait gallery would "humanise modernity: to see the new machine age in terms of people . . . a modernity with a human face" (Woodall 1997, 221). The result of Carlyle's vision would see the National Portrait Gallery in London established in 1856.

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A significant stipulation placed by the gallery at the time on all portraits for exhibition was that they were required to have been made *from life*—from direct observation of the sitter by the artist. Carlyle's vision and reasoning, however, was not entirely without precedent. Portrait galleries could be said to go back even to antiquity (Dillon 2006) and Poggio Bracciollini, the Italian Renaissance humanist, believed, "images of the men who had excelled in the pursuit of glory and wisdom, if placed before the eyes, would help ennoble and stir up the soul" (Joost-Gaugier 1985, 58). More pointedly, Paolo Giovio, the Renaissance humanist, historian, and biographer, who set out a collection of 484 portraits commissioned by him from various artists and displayed alongside his own written biographies of the sitters, stipulated his preference that portraits not be idealized and that the artist paints them from life (Price-Zimmermann 1995).

Much as we today find ourselves in acceptance of the digital revolution to the extent that we recognise some of its shortcomings, so too by the mid-1850s had the novelty and implications of photography somewhat been absorbed since it was commercially introduced in 1839. Through his vision of giving the public a chance to "meet" with fellow humans, where the artist was the only other person who had stood in their stead, Carlyle counteracted what he saw as being lost through the onslaught of mechanization. In the clear knowledge that the pre-requisite encounter for the purpose of the portrait had taken place, the process assures the audience of the authenticity of those depicted. It is this principle behind the enshrined "painting from life" clause that still echoes in major worldwide portrait galleries and portrait prizes today.

One contemporary example of this can be seen in the requirements of the B. P. Portrait Award held in London's National Portrait Gallery each year. Entry requirements state: "The work entered should be a painting based on a sitting or study from life and the human figure must predominate" (National Portrait Gallery 2010b). Going one step further to authenticate such an engagement of artist and sitter, the Archibald Prize for portraiture in Sydney, Australia, states that "Portraits . . . must be painted from life. The competitor must complete and sign the entry form and the subject/sitter must also provide a written statement that he/she sat for the portrait" (Art Gallery of New South Wales 2016). Making the point even more clear to artists, in 2010 the Xstrata Percival Portrait Award (Townsville, Queensland, Australia) stressed the importance of the live human engagement by employing bold type in their "Conditions of Entry"—"The portrait is to be of a **'REAL' PERSON**. It is expected that the subject of the work has **SAT FOR THE ARTIST** at least once" (Townsville City Council 2010).

What is the value of derivations of Carlyle's nineteenth-century concerns and requirements for painting "real portraits" of "real" people in relation to our post-digital twenty-first century, where reality TV and social media platforms make claim to situational authenticity through networks of virtual encounters? Surely painted portraits are not dependent upon archaic literal human engagements when contemporary digital technology can represent a high-definition colour image of any human face anywhere in the world instantaneously. Surely such images are more than adequate likenesses of the individuals depicted. Perhaps this is not the sort of "real(ness)" to which Carlyle, and those who have adopted his mantra, refer.

To solely work from a photographic source of the sitter for the purpose of painting their portrait may well result in a painting with a retinal, mimetic likeness of the sitter. If the "identity" of a person could be reduced solely to a clinically accurate likeness of their physical facial appearance, then something in the order of a passport-type photograph would seem best suited. As Roland Barthes (1915–1980) famously observed, "Photography is pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always something that is represented) . . . photography never lies . . . every photograph is a certificate of presence. . . . Photography can tell me this much better than painted portraits" (Barthes [1980] 2000, 28).

Clearly, from the emotional human experience, there is something sadly lacking in such photographic images that reproduce "likeness" but not life-likeness. This experience is often exasperated, not fulfilled, by digital technologies with the promise of virtual-reality encounters. The very term itself is oxymoronic—"virtual" is close, but it's not quite there. The authentic

experience of the human face-to-face encounter therefore implies a certain value and quality otherwise unattainable by other technologies. Expressed through art, the physical and cognitive experience of this human interaction seems best perceived, transferred, and conveyed through the convention of the painting process, which requires a certain "unfolding" through application in real time and space, not digital or virtual. Lucian Freud's conversation with David Hockney expresses this well: "When you looked at a canvas, Hockney said, you could see all the hours of sitting 'layered' into the pigment. In other words, a portrait is the record of a relationship between two individuals, one that unfolds as the two people involved get to know each other—through time" (Gayford 2013, 15). The physicality of the meeting allows the mechanics of looking and the techniques of painting to coalesce with the nuances of intellectual thought and perceptions about the personality of the sitter. Both artist and sitter then are essential to the success of the joint venture.

The (in)famous case of John Bloomfield's painting of film director Tim Burstall in 1975, submitted to that year's Archibald Prize in Sydney, highlights the extent to which this pre-requisite of working from life is enshrined as sacrosanct for painted portraiture to such prizes and portrait collections. The artist never met the sitter but had worked solely from a magazine photograph. The prize was withdrawn from Bloomfield and given to another artist whose submission was worked from life. The rules were famously upheld and have not been changed, other than to make the specific requirement even more legally binding. Nevertheless, the fact that Bloomfield's painting had been, initially, awarded the prize seemed to challenge the assumption of the vital importance of the pre-requisite, suggesting perhaps that the ruling was anachronistic. Likewise, though London's National Portrait Gallery's acquisition and disposal policy still states "that portraits acquired should in some way be authentic records of the appearance of the sitter, ideally done from life" (National Portrait Gallery 2010a), their acquisition of a portrait of the late singer Amy Winehouse by Marlene Dumas, in November 2012, was actually painted from a photograph after the singer's death. Dumas, who had never met the singer in her lifetime, had "sought out images of Winehouse online for the work" (Brown 2012). However, this is a rare exception to the rule and one made in light of the absence of any other portrait made from life—similar to that of Captain James Cook in Australia's National Portrait Gallery. Cook had died in 1779, but his portrait by John Webber, an official artist on Cook's voyages, was painted posthumously in 1782. In the case of Dumas, the desirability of London's National Portrait Gallery to gain a work by such a high-profile artist should be a factor. This is in line with the acquisition policy of the National Portrait Gallery in Australia, itself based on the London Portrait Gallery. Dr. Sarah Engledow, Historian and Curator at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, Australia, states that "curatorial staff of the Gallery have always maintained a list of some 350 desirable subjects" but that recent policies may allow a portrait acquisition if it is considered to be "an exceptional portrait . . . by any one of a small group of major portraitists" (Sarah Engledow, email to author Andrew Collis, June 2, 2014). These exceptions notwithstanding, overwhelmingly, when highly acclaimed contemporary artists have engaged in commissioned works or entered portrait prizes, they do need to subscribe to the prerequisite of working directly from the sitter and, like all entrants, they counter-sign a witnessed form to declare as much.

Implicit in the act of painting from life is the sense of authenticity of the image—the artist as witness to the sitter through time spent in their physical presence. In turn, the viewing of such portraits by an audience now *au fait* and complacent with digital imagery becomes an even more meaningful human exchange, since it is heightened by the contrast of experiences. The artist acts in the stead of the spectator and thus the human experience of a personal, intimate encounter with the sitter is filtered through the emotional conduit specific to the painter's scrutiny of looking and perceiving, ultimately also accessible then to the viewer. Again, it is this quality of transference of human emotional and intellectual engagement that is considered specifically appropriate and intrinsic to the painted portrait.

Distinguished Harvard University professor David Joselit wrestles with the notion of painting still being capable of invoking directly personal, human emotions because of the multifarious ways that art can be seen, accessed, and experienced by today's post-digital audience. He gives the examples of accessing collections and exhibitions online or going around galleries taking snaps on iPhones to view later. Such activities distance and depersonalise the original painting; it becomes mechanical information to be viewed at a different time, in a different context and via a different format (Joselit 2013). In this sense, though the criteria for portrait prizes enshrines the former value of working directly with paint to maintain and presumably signify the human touch and shared authentic experience of artist with sitter, it mainly organises and exhibits the resultant portraits more in line with Joselit's aforementioned paradox. For example, submissions of the paintings are more frequently submitted digitally, usually via online websites, before the actual physical painting is viewed. Australia's oldest and highly acclaimed Archibald Prize makes all finalist works available to view online usually before, during, and after the actual exhibition of works. Such images can usually be downloaded for individual use—again, for reviewing later at an individual's discretion or even for re-posting on individual social media sites such as Facebook or Pinterest.

It is increasingly uncommon that there are any restrictions on the taking of digital photographs in the galleries of artworks. Since photography hinders greatly the perception of actual scale, texture, and colour of original artworks, the general acceptance of its ubiquity throughout the process, even by the very spectators that attend the actual exhibition, can be seen to undermine the importance otherwise still placed upon the physicality of paint and the painting as a unique object. This contradiction is maintained by the same portrait galleries that require artists to forward a digital image of their work at submission stage, upon which the gallery will, ironically, make their selection of finalist works to be enjoyed for their uniqueness of embodiment and expression of physical presence and emotion about which we have spoken. In acceptance of these procedural requirements, where, as in these or the case of London's BP Portrait Prize, works are entered internationally, the painter is forced to consider the initially submitted reproduced image of the portrait in a digital format before it will ever be seen physically—substantiating the very paradox that Joselit articulates.

Nevertheless, if anything, the widened exposure that digital technology brings to portrait galleries and prizes has, in turn, propagated and popularised their very existence and heightened their singular specialness. Prestigious portrait prizes, as well as the establishment of new twenty-first-century portrait galleries, garner huge public and media interest, impressive monetary awards, sponsorship, and submissions from highly reputable and often high-profile contemporary painters. In 2014, the Archibald portrait prize in Sydney—affording $75,000—attracted 884 entries, while Sydney's Doug Moran Prize for portraiture received 985 entries (Taylor 2014), with $150,000 afforded in prize money—twice as much. Perhaps there is some significance in the Moran, now in its twenty-eighth year of existence, eclipsing the century-old Archibald. It may be related to the artist, sitter, and audience sensing that its portrait submissions both ensnare and emit more the elusive "human touch" factor. Andrew Taylor of Sydney's *Morning Herald* writes that "the strength of the two prizes was a testament to the enduring popularity of portraiture," but that "unlike the Archibald Prize, which is dominated by portraits of celebrities and artists, notoriety is not an entry requirement for the Moran portrait prizes." He quotes Peter Moran, the chief executive of Moran Health Care Group, as saying, "We're happy for an artist to paint anybody, their best friend . . . I think people are more able to relate to what I describe as normal people" (Taylor 2014). Whether individuals are famous or not, it is this inherent desire to connect with what makes "real" people real—the perceived authenticity, warmth, and understanding of human feeling—that triumphs through physical encounter encapsulated through the process of expression in paint in defiance of the dissipation through digital appropriation, manipulation, and distillation.

Conclusion

The ongoing demand by portrait galleries and portrait-competition stakeholders for painted portraits made as a result of human encounter testifies to the cultural relevance of this long-held convention. Painted portraits from life continue to best express intimacy and authentic human engagement even against, and perhaps because of, the current ubiquity of digital facial depiction. Despite what has become a familiar accepted norm of "virtual" encounters in digital spaces, what initially may have appeared to be an antiquated and outmoded convention of the artist and sitter meeting face-to-face for the purpose of creating a credible portrait proves to still have validity today. Its embodiment of essential humanising elements and experiences satisfy a demand and need for human connection and expression—qualities that fall victim to digital/virtual reality—and which therefore maintain a strong significance and value to this "post-digital" age.

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