

Proof

“This book seems certain to establish the philosophy of portraiture as a new and important topic of debate within philosophy and to demonstrate the centrality of philosophical aesthetics to the issues of self, identity and our understanding of each other, that concern us all.”

– Ian Ground, *University of Hertfordshire, UK*

“This is an excellent book on the elusive but pervasive genre of portraiture. It provides the reader with conceptual tools to understand the boundaries of the genre, the value of portraits and some ethical issues they give rise to. Also, it invites the reader to consider interesting questions such as whether there can be portraits of absent sitters, how to understand sport cards portraits or fictional portraits appearing in literary works.”

– Paloma Atencia-Linares, *National Autonomous University of Mexico*

Proof

Proof

**Taylor & Francis**  
Not for distribution

Proof

## Portraits and Philosophy

Portraits are everywhere. One finds them not only in museums and galleries, but also in newspapers and magazines, in the homes of people and in the boardrooms of companies, on stamps and coins, on millions of cell phones and computers. Despite its huge popularity, however, portraiture hasn't received much philosophical attention. While there are countless art historical studies of portraiture, contemporary philosophy has largely remained silent on the subject. This book aims to address that lacuna. It brings together philosophers (and philosophically minded historians) with different areas of expertise to discuss this enduring and continuously fascinating genre.

The chapters in this collection are ranged under five broad themes. Part I examines the general nature of portraiture and what makes it distinctive as a genre. Part II looks at some of the subgenres of portraiture, such as double portraiture, and at some special cases, such as sport card portraits and portraits of people not present. How emotions are expressed and evoked by portraits is the central focus of Part III, while Part IV explores the relation between portraiture, fiction, and depiction more generally. Finally, in Part V, some of the ethical issues surrounding portraiture are addressed. The book closes with an epilogue about portraits of philosophers.

*Portraits and Philosophy* tangles with deep questions about the nature and effects of portraiture in ways that will substantially advance the scholarly discussion of the genre. It will be of interest to scholars and students working in philosophy of art, history of art, and the visual arts.

**Hans Maes** is Senior Lecturer in History and Philosophy of Art at the University of Kent. He is the author of *Conversations on Art and Aesthetics* (2017) and editor of the essay collections *Art and Pornography* (2012) and *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography* (2013).

**Routledge Research in Aesthetics**

**The Pleasure of Pictures**

Pictorial Experience and Aesthetic Appreciation

*Edited by Jérôme Pelletier and Alberto Voltolini*

**Thinking with Images**

An Enactivist Aesthetics

*John M Carvalho*

**A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment**

*Rupert Read*

**Fictive Narrative Philosophy**

How Fiction Can Act as Philosophy

*Michael Boylan*

**A Philosophy of the Art School**

*Michael Newall*

**The Aesthetics of Self-Becoming**

How Art Forms Empower

*Paul Crowther*

**Philosophy and Film**

Bridging Divides

*Edited by Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva, and Steven S. Gouveia*

**Paintings and the Past**

Philosophy, History, Art

*Ivan Gaskell*

**Portraits and Philosophy**

*Edited by Hans Maes*

For more information about this series, please visit: [www.routledge.com/Routledge-Research-in-Aesthetics/book-series/RRA](http://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Research-in-Aesthetics/book-series/RRA)

Proof

# Portraits and Philosophy

Edited by Hans Maes

Taylor & Francis  
Not for distribution

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Proof

Proof

First published 2020  
by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2020 Taylor & Francis

The right of the editor to be identified as the author of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-18940-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-19937-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Proof

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>   | xii       |
| <b>Introduction: Portraits and Philosophy</b>                                | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>PART I</b>  |           |
| <b>The Nature of Portraiture</b>   | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>1 Portraiture Portrayed</b>   | <b>9</b>  |
| IVAN GASKELL   |           |
| <b>2 Portraiture and Portrait-Seeing: From Caravaggio to Digital Selfies</b> | <b>24</b> |
| ALESSANDRO GIOVANNELLI   |           |
| <b>3 Portraits, Persons, and Poses</b>                                       | <b>47</b> |
| PAUL GUYER   |           |
| <b>4 Philosophy of Portraiture: A Programmatic Overview</b>                  | <b>62</b> |
| MATTEO RAVASIO   |           |
| <b>PART II</b>   |           |
| <b>Subgenres and Special Cases</b>   | <b>79</b> |
| <b>5 Double Portraiture</b>  | <b>81</b> |
| ELEN M. DEPREZ, MICHAEL NEWALL   |           |
| <b>6 Moving Picture Portraits</b>  | <b>97</b> |
| CYNTHIA FREELAND   |           |

|    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| x  | <i>Contents</i>   |     |
| 7  | <b>Portraits of People Not Present</b><br>BENCE NANAY   | 113 |
| 8  | <b>Portraits of the Landscape</b><br>ERICH HATALA MATTHES   | 128 |
| 9  | <b>Sport Card Portraiture</b><br>JASON HOLT   | 140 |
|    | <b>PART III</b>   |     |
|    | <b>Portraiture, Empathy, and Emotion</b>  | 151 |
| 10 | <b>Truth and Empathy in the Portraits of Kokoschka</b><br>JENEFER ROBINSON  | 153 |
| 11 | <b>Without Shame? Lee Friedlander's Late Self-Portraits</b><br>DIARMUID COSTELLO  | 171 |
| 12 | <b>'And Time Will Have His Fancy . . .': On Being Moved<br/>by Portraits of Unknown People</b><br>HANS MAES                 | 189 |
|    | <b>PART IV</b>  |     |
|    | <b>Portraiture, Fiction, and Depiction</b>  | 205 |
| 13 | <b>Real Portraits in Literature</b><br>STACIE FRIEND  | 207 |
| 14 | <b>The Power of Picasso: Reconciling Realism and<br/>Antirealism in the <i>Portrait of Gertrude Stein</i></b><br>IRA NEWMAN | 223 |
| 15 | <b>Portraiture: Seeing-As and Seeing-In</b><br>MARTIN HAMMER  | 239 |
| 16 | <b>The Ethics of Portraiture</b><br>A.W. EATON  | 256 |
| 17 | <b>The Sublime Clara Mather</b><br>KENNETH WALDEN   | 269 |



Proof

*Contents* xi

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>18 Respecting Photographic Subjects</b> | 287 |
| MACALESTER BELL                            |     |
| <b>Epilogue: Portraits of Philosophers</b> | 302 |
| HANS MAES                                  |     |
| <i>Contributors</i>                        | 316 |
| <i>Index</i>                               | 320 |

**Taylor & Francis**  
Not for distribution

Proof

## 12 ‘And Time Will Have His Fancy . . .’

### On Being Moved by Portraits of Unknown People

*Hans Maes*

In *The Vanishing Man*, a book that is part detective story, part biography, Laura Cumming documents her strong emotional reactions to, and deep love for, Diego Velázquez’s portraits. But she also notes her disappointment in the scholarship of art where such responses are rarely thematized:

There seems to be some collective recoil from the idea that art might actually overwhelm, distress or enchant us. . . . Even quite fundamental emotions are not in the language of scholarship, let alone museums, which rarely speak of the heart in connection with art. (2016, p. 6)

This observation contains more than a grain of truth – certainly when it comes to the study of portraiture. Art historians and philosophers of art, by and large, do not write about being personally enchanted or distressed by certain portraits.<sup>1</sup> My own previous work in this area is no exception. However, like Cumming, I now think that is a shame. Or at least, it’s a missed opportunity. That is why, in this paper, I would like to write about portraits that I have found especially enthralling and moving.

Here’s a brief overview of some of the most meaningful encounters with portraits that I have had in the last couple of years. In 2015 I visited the exhibition *Faces Then/Now* at Bozar (Brussels) and spent half an hour in front of just one painting, *Portrait of a Man* (1570–1580), painted by an anonymous artist but of such stunning quality that it was put on the cover of the exhibition catalogue (See Figure 12.1).

In 2016 The Royal Academy put on the show *In the Age of Giorgione* and there again I felt bewitched by one picture in particular: Giorgione’s so-called *Terris Portrait* (1506). A year later, in 2017, I distinctly remember visiting the exhibition *The Encounter* at the National Portrait Gallery (London) and literally being moved to tears by Hans Holbein the Younger’s drawing *Woman Wearing a White Headdress*, c. 1532–43 (See Figure 12.2).

That same year I also went to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and found myself drawn not so much to the crowd-pulling Rembrandts and



Figure 12.1 *Portrait of a Man* (1570–1580), Anonymous Flemish painter, Art Institute of Chicago.

Source: © 2019. The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY/ Scala, Florene.

Vermeers but to Jan van Scorel's small but exquisite *Portrait of a citizen of Haarlem* (1529) (See Figure 12.3). I can barely recall any of the other works I saw and studied at these different museums, but these four portraits have stayed with me and to this day I can recall their powerful impact on me.

But what exactly makes this type of portrait so mesmerizing and moving? I say 'type' because these four examples do seem to have a surprising number of features in common. They are all 16th century head-and-shoulder portraits, roughly life-size, painted very skillfully in a naturalistic style, with a neutral, monochrome background. Moreover, each of them depicts an unknown sitter who bears a serious expression and looks



Figure 12.2 Hans Holbein the Younger, *Woman Wearing a White Headdress* (c. 1532–43), Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018.

directly at the viewer. Why is it that precisely these portraits drew my attention and had such a profound effect on me? That is the question I will seek to address in this paper. Admittedly, it is a rather personal question. But I trust that many other people will have shared, or will be able to share, my experience in front of such portraits. And, in thinking about these examples and experiences, I hope to arrive at some more general insights about the appeal and value of portraiture.

### Character

While only few scholars have written about being enchanted or bewitched by a portrait, many have tried to give an account of what constitutes



Figure 12.3 Jan van Scorel, *Portrait of a citizen of Haarlem* (1529).

greatness in portraiture. Such an account may be helpful here in that it may offer a key to understanding the particularly fascinating quality of, say, the Jan van Scorel painting or the Holbein drawing.

According to the standard view of greatness in portraiture, the best portraits manage to distill and clarify the complexity of a person's character into one image. This is a very widely held view, endorsed by both amateurs and scholars of the genre, and across different periods of time. In the 19th century, for instance, G.W.F. Hegel stated: 'It is one thing for the artist simply to imitate the face of the sitter, its surface and external form, . . . and quite another to be able to portray the true features which express the inmost soul of the subject' (1975, p. 155). The influential 20th century art historian E.H. Gombrich concurred: 'This, at any rate, is the ever-present ambition of the great portrait painter: . . . to bring out and

to reveal a person's "inner self" (1945, p. 6). In a conversation between Ruth Spencer and celebrated portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh, she asked how he would define the art of portraiture. His response: 'When you penetrate and remove all the masks which we all have and make a synthesis of the many moods a man has: that's portraiture' (Spencer 1976, p. 407). More recently, Cynthia Freeland put the idea as follows: 'The best portraits manifest a person's . . . unique essence or inner character'; and 'the greatest portraits . . . reveal someone's essential nature or their character in a deep sense' (2010, p. 44).

This standard view certainly helps to explain why we admire some portraits. Take, for instance, the iconic portrait of Silvio Berlusconi made by photographer Platon. One reason why his photograph has become justly famous is that it seems to sum up and capture the character of this notoriously lecherous, feckless, and unscrupulous politician. But what about the intriguing 16th century portraits of unknown people that caught my attention? Can the standard view explain why these are so exquisitely fascinating and even moving? Not really, I think.

First, one could ask how much is actually being revealed in these portraits. Is the subject of Holbein's drawing a kind or mean person? Is she proud or humble, strong-willed or meek? It's impossible to tell due to the almost blank expression of the young woman with the white headdress. The same is true for the other three paintings I listed. They seem to reveal no specific emotion, no dominant mood, no particular vice or virtue in the sitter. John Berger, who often attacked the 'myth that the portrait painter was a revealer of souls' (1969, p. 42) and confidently claimed that 'ninety nine per cent of [portraits] totally lack psychological insight' (1969, p. 42), may have slightly overstated his case. But I think he was right to observe that 'the average Renaissance portrait . . . has very little psychological content' (1969, p. 42).

Second, to those who would maintain that these portraits do show some of the sitter's distinctive character traits or emotions, the following question can be put: How do we know that what is being shown is truthful and accurate? In the case of Berlusconi we can check whether the portrait fits with what we independently know to be true about this man. But if the sitter is completely unknown, we possess no such independent knowledge. So, how then do we know that the portraits are genuinely revealing the sitter's character, rather than misleading or misinforming the viewer?

Furthermore, and third, why would anyone really care about what is being revealed? Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I can learn from Holbein's drawing that the sitter was calm, reserved, and rather meek. Since we don't know anything else about the sitter this is just an isolated piece of information that we now possess. But how does this minimal cognitive gain explain the profound and powerful effect of this picture? It simply doesn't. And this is another reason to think that the standard

view of greatness in portraiture cannot help us in our investigation. The inkling we get of the sitter's character is rendered almost meaningless by the fact that we cannot connect it to anything else we know about that person. But when it comes to the portrait itself, the opposite seems true: the fact that I don't know anything about the sitter makes my experience of their portrait especially poignant and meaningful. (This, it should be noted, is one of the more intriguing differences between biography and portraiture. We don't tend to be particularly interested in a biography of someone whom we have never heard of. By contrast, portraits of unknown people can draw and hold our attention quite easily.)

### Presence

If the revelation of an inner self cannot fully account for the enchantment of these portraits, we'll have to look for an alternative explanation. According to Tarnya Cooper, curatorial director at the National Portrait Gallery: 'Most portrait drawings aim to record likeness accurately and/or to capture the character and physical appearance of the sitter, but some exceptional studies . . . also appear to recreate a sense of the sitter's physical presence at a moment in time' (Cooper 2017, p. 32).

The portraits that I have been referring to, it has to be said, do seem to recreate something of the depicted person's physical presence. So, here we may have a plausible reason for why they stand out so much. The fact that the *topos* of lifelikeness – the idea that inanimate materials such as pigment, stone, and bronze could be transformed into a 'living' presence – was particularly prominent in the 16th century, only lends further credibility to this hypothesis. Artists were praised if they could not just copy after life, but create something *pare che spirimo e sieno vivissimi* (appearing, or seeming, to be breathing and absolutely alive), something *non dipinta ma viva* (not painted but alive). For instance, Michelangelo's marble personification *Aurora* was said to be a living thing conversing with visitors to the Medici Chapel, and Lodovico Dolce claimed of Titian that '*ogni sua figura è viva, si muove, è le carni tremano* (everyone of his figures is alive, moves and has flesh that palpitates)' (Jacobs 2005, p. 9).

It's not hard to see how this quality would be especially effective in portraits. In fact, to this day, this sense of presence is invoked to explain the particular attraction of some portrait painters. Lucian Freud is a case in point. According to the critic Sebastian Smee, 'Freud's great contribution to the idea of portraiture . . . is not so much about "penetrating character" or illustrating personality traits; it is about the strongest possible presentation of a specific human presence' (quoted in Hammer 2007, p. 28).<sup>2</sup> Shearer West actually thinks that this is one of the advantages that portraiture in general has over biography since 'a biography cannot convey the presence of the individual with such immediacy and evocative power' (West 2004, p. 52).

A term that often gets thrown around in this context is 'uncanny'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the impression of life emanating from a lifeless object can be thrilling and surprising up to the point where it may become creepy and unsettling. Think of people's responses to the hyperrealist sculptures of Duane Hanson or Ron Mueck or to certain wax works at Madame Tussauds. However, and this needs emphasizing, such responses are markedly different from my (and other people's) experience in front of the Holbein or Giorgione portraits. To begin with, I was not struck in any way by an uncanny *resemblance*, the way one often is when visiting Madame Tussaud's, because for me it was of course impossible to compare the portrait with its unknown sitter. Furthermore, there seems to be a real contrast between the superficial thrills offered by the waxworks museum and the deeply moving experience that, say, the Terris portrait offers; or between the kinds of fantasy you indulge in when you get to hug your favorite celebrity at Madame Tussaud's and the harsh existential truth that the Holbein drawing seems to embody (more about this later). If the uncanny is defined as 'an anxious uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility' (Windsor 2019, p. 51) it should be clear that the portraits I'm referring to do not offer that sort of experience. They do not instill anxiety nor do they produce the cold shivers so typical of the uncanny. And while they are painted in a naturalistic style, they are not *trompe l'oeuil*'s that create a troubling uncertainty about what is real – in the way that Ron Mueck's installations often do cause unease and nervousness in viewers.

But, leaving aside the uncanny, what about the sense of presence or lifelikeness as an explanatory factor? Will that suffice to account for the special experience afforded by those four portraits listed above? The answer has to be 'no', if only because there are many lifelike portraits and non-portraits that do not seem to offer the same sort of experience. To return to some of the examples that have already been mentioned: I greatly admire Titian's paintings and Lucian Freud's portraits and consider them fabulous works of art for many different reasons. But they don't move me in the same way as the Holbein drawing did. Despite the undeniable lifelike quality of their subjects, they have a different impact on the viewer. And this is surely due to some of the different features they possess: they are not paintings of unknown people; subjects are not looking directly at the viewer; they are often full figure; etc. Hence, what makes those Renaissance portraits particularly fascinating cannot just be the sense of presence. It's bound to be more complicated than that. Their profound effect, it seems reasonable to assume, must in some way be linked to the whole cluster of properties they share.

## Punctum

One thing is obvious when I reflect on the experience I had in front of these portraits, namely, that my experience was a multifaceted one. It was



an experience that unfolded and changed over time and that involved a jumble of thoughts and feelings. To do justice to this kind of complexity, it seems clear that we can't rely on a simple and reductive explanation (e.g. 'revelation of character' or 'sense of presence'). I propose instead to approach the matter in a roundabout way and to seek clarification by drawing a comparison with other profound and moving experiences that people have had in front of art works.

The first example I have in mind is Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010. This is a work of performance art that Abramovic created for her big retrospective at MoMA in 2010. Two chairs were placed in the middle of a large room, one facing the other. Abramovic would take her place in one chair and then any member of the audience could sit down opposite of her. The artist would remain silent and still throughout the performance and simply look at the person sitting across from her. This would last until the audience member felt ready to leave. That could be after just five minutes or after a couple of hours. Then someone else would sit down across from Abramovic and the performance would continue. As one critic noted: 'The act is so simple that the audience has the time to analyze its simplicity: we are both here, and we are both human; we share that with each other' (Lader 2014). And: 'Because of the shared humanity between performer and audience, vulnerability surrounds the performance; the audience member begins to carry out self-reflection when she sees this commonality in the performance' (Lader 2014). As a result, participants would often become overwhelmed by their own painful feelings. Many of them commented afterwards on how powerful and profoundly moving they found the experience. (This was thematized by the artist Marco Anelli who made a beautiful series of portraits of people crying whilst participating in this performance.)<sup>4</sup>

My second point of reference is a story recounted by James Elkins in his book *Pictures and Tears* (2001). He received a letter from a Dutch woman who wrote to him about a visit to Michelangelo's Medici Chapel seventeen years after she first entered the chapel. She realized that it was completely unchanged, and that it must have looked just the same centuries ago when Michelangelo abandoned it.

Suddenly, it was as if time had stopped moving. The sensation was oddly intimate. "I remember the stillness in there," she wrote. . . . She cried, and when her husband asked her why, she could say only, "It is so beautiful": but what she meant, as she explained in the letter, was that she had experienced "what life in reality is all about. Time stands still, or does not exist." She felt "a certain stillness," and at the same moment "a feeling of being touched, of great happiness".

(Elkins 2001, p. 112)

She goes on: 'Time itself, she thought, was nearly cancelled: when nothing changes, even time "stands still," or ceases to make sense. And then she somehow felt this timelessness as a message directed at her' (2001, p. 112).<sup>5</sup>

My third and final example is taken from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, a book that he wrote in 1980 shortly after his mother passed away. Mixing personal observation with philosophical reflection he speaks about his longstanding fascination with photography, but his recent grief comes through in a famous passage where he describes finding an old snapshot photograph of his mother:

In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.

(Barthes 1981, p. 96)

*Punctum* is the term that Barthes uses for something in a picture that pricks the viewer and that is perceived as especially poignant even though it was not deliberately included for that reason. It is something that is *seen* without being *shown*, one could say. Such a *punctum* can be a particular detail that, contrary to the photographer's intention, jumps out at the viewer (the sitter's untied shoelaces, for example). But the *punctum* can also be, as it is the case in the snapshot of Barthes' mother, the destructive force of time that the photograph unwittingly bears witness of: 'This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die' (Barthes 1981, p. 96). In this bravely confessional book, Barthes recounts how he shudders and is overwhelmed by 'this vertigo of time defeated' (1981, p. 97).

Each of these examples is taken from a different art form: performance art, architecture, and photography. Nevertheless, the experiences described here offer illuminating points of comparison for the Renaissance paintings that are the focus of this paper. In fact, I want to argue that one begins to get a sense of the complex response that these Renaissance portraits of unknown people may elicit in a viewer, if one takes all of the above experiences together and rolls them into one. That this is not the extravagant claim it may seem at first sight, I hope to demonstrate in the next section.

## Encounter

In both the case of Abramovic and the Renaissance portraits, people can have the experience of an extraordinary encounter. And in both instances

this is triggered by similar features. As one art historian rightly points out: ‘We often read faces with eyes positioned towards the viewer as evidence of a direct engagement or personal encounter’ (Cooper 2017, p. 35). The eye-to-eye is thus transformed into an I-to-I engagement. Granted, the Renaissance portraits are paintings and not real people.<sup>6</sup> But the skillful naturalism and life-size format make it quite easy to ignore this.<sup>7</sup> And, as Jodi Cranston notes, ‘The experience of viewing is constructed to be mutual and shared, and consequently the surface of the image confuses rather than upholds the division between inside and outside the frame’ (2000, p. 8). This effect is further enhanced by the neutral, monochrome background. Whereas period detail and setting would help to demarcate inside from outside the frame and create a notable distance between the two subjects, this does not happen here.<sup>8</sup>

In both the Abramovic performance and the Renaissance portraits, we have a close-up head-and-shoulders view suggesting proximity and intimacy. Unlike the full figure, it does not invite an exploring gaze, and so typically eyes will remain interlocked for longer. Together with the seriousness of the expression and the pervading stillness this is what tends to make the encounter an extraordinary one.<sup>9</sup> After all, in everyday encounters we do not silently and intently gaze at one another for a prolonged period of time.<sup>10</sup> It is a set-up that is eminently conducive of reflection and self-reflection. ‘Direct gaze perception’, as it is called in psychology, is known to lead to heightened self-awareness in various ways, to the point that even a pair of eyes painted on the wall can prevent people from shoplifting (Conty, George, and Hietanen 2016; Lewis 2015). It’s not hard to see that this effect will be especially pronounced in the case of Abramovic or the Renaissance portraits because here one finds one’s ‘museal gaze’ being returned, so that the scrutinizer becomes the scrutinized, and *vice versa*.<sup>11</sup> The impression that consciousness flows in both directions is continuously reinforced. And to repeat the observation that was made in relation to *The Artist is Present*: ‘The act is so simple that the audience has the time to analyze its simplicity: we are both here, and we are both human; we share that with each other’ (Lader 2014).

Contrary to *The Artist is Present*, however, one’s encounter is with someone from the past, someone who lived centuries ago. In coming to be aware of this, one can be struck by the same feeling as the Dutch woman had upon revisiting the Medici Chapel, namely, the sense that ‘time stands still, or does not exist’. (In my own case, this intuition was particularly strong in front of the Holbein drawing. As A.S. Byatt already wrote about Holbein: ‘He got out of his time – as he got into our time – with a completeness that few painters have achieved’ 2001, p. 15.) Because an unbridgeable gap is seemingly bridged a feeling of happiness may ensue, as is duly reported by the visitor to the Medici Chapel. Similarly, standing in front of those 16th-century portraits and feeling the suspension of time may generate a sense of elation.

However, the feeling typically does not last, because time will reassert itself.<sup>12</sup> Sooner or later, and this can happen suddenly or gradually, it dawns on you that the other party in this intimate encounter is no longer alive. You realize that there really is a gap there and that it really is unbridgeable. You come to grasp, as Barthes did, that you're witnessing a catastrophe which has already occurred: the very person you're looking in the eye, is going to die. And like Barthes, this apprehension can shake you to the core.

The train of thoughts and emotions that I have sketched here, it should be noted, can move along at various speeds. The various musings can take place in just a few seconds or can take up a much longer period of time. Also, the emotional journey does not always proceed in a neat linear fashion. Feelings and thoughts are often intertwined, affecting and even looping back on each other.

Let me also, in closing this section, add a comment about Barthes' concept of *punctum*. Barthes – and many have followed him in this – applies it exclusively to photography, but it should be clear that the 'defeat of Time', as he calls it, is equally legible in (some) historical portrait paintings.<sup>13</sup> This is beautifully illustrated in Henry James's *The Wings of Dove* when the main character, Millie Theale, responds thusly to a Bronzino portrait:

She found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. . . . The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque sadness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage – only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.

(quoted in Byatt 2001, p. 6)

Laura Cumming, in her reflections on Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, writes:

The moment you set eyes on them, you know that these beautiful children will die, that they are already dead and gone, and yet they live in the here and now of this moment, brief and bright as fireflies beneath the sepulchral gloom.

(Cumming 2016, p. 2)

## Vanitas

In my roundabout explanation of the powerful effect of these Renaissance portraits I have made reference to nearly all of the features that they share: the head-and-shoulders format, the skillful naturalistic style, the neutral, monochrome background, the serious facial expression, the direct gaze, their 16th-century origin and the defeat of time that they consequently embody.

But there is one shared feature that has not yet figured in my explanation: the fact that they all depict an unknown sitter. This is arguably, for viewers like me, the most evocative aspect of these works. Why? Because, in the process of reflection and self-reflection instigated by the portraits, one comes to realize that the sitters must have been very important in their time. Otherwise they could not have had their portrait made by such prominent and skillful artists. So they must have been among the richest, most famous, or most loved people of the 16th century and, yet they are now completely and irretrievably forgotten. It doesn't take much to go from this sobering thought to the next: that one day we, too, will inevitably lapse into oblivion. Thus, for the receptive viewer, I propose, these portraits may operate as Vanitas paintings, exhorting the viewer to consider the transience of human existence. In fact, in a number of respects, they are more impactful than traditional Vanitas paintings.

First, they confront us with the ultimate stage of transience. A 'memento senescere', like Giorgione's *La Vecchia*, offers the viewer a reminder that they will grow old. A 'memento mori', like one finds on the outer panels of Rogier Van der Weyden's *Braque Triptych*, reminds viewers of their own mortality. But what these portraits offer is really a 'memento oblitum iri': a reminder that oblivion is waiting for all of us.<sup>14</sup> In that sense they present the final stage of transience: not only will we grow old and face death at some point, but ultimately we will be forgotten and vanish into obscurity.

Second, because they are not didactic or programmatic in the way that other Vanitas paintings are, they are all the more effective. Instead of hitting you over the head with overly familiar symbols and injunctions (the skull, the hourglass, the snuffed candle), these portraits lure you into a state of self-reflection so that the relevant insight creeps up on you and really hits home.<sup>15</sup> I have already mentioned how direct gaze perception enhances self-scrutiny. But the mirror-like quality of these portraits is not just due to the fact that the sitter looks back at the viewer. It's also due to the fact that they look like the viewer in many ways, that is, they look just like the sort of the people you might encounter in the street today. The neutral background and the lack of a period setting obviously play a part in this. It makes it much harder to dismiss these unknown sitters as fundamentally different, living in radically different circumstances and different times. So it becomes quite easy to reflect on the common human fate that you share. (This, incidentally, is also why contemporary ghost cities like Fukushima or Chernobyl are often experienced as more haunting compared to, say, Angkor Wat or Mayan Temples: the former, unlike the latter, mirror a life that we recognize all too well.)<sup>16</sup>

Third, as a 'memento oblitum iri', these portraits are not as self-defeating or insincere as other Vanitas portraits. For it is a well-known paradox of the genre that many of the sitters of Vanitas portraits have achieved precisely the lasting fame that the paintings themselves purport

to be futile. By exemplifying the destructive force of time, they are often oblique attempts to defeat time, as is well-illustrated by the familiar *Vanitas maxim* 'vita brevis, ars longa'. Not so with the portraits that I have discussed here. Each of these was likely a sincere attempt to keep someone's memory alive but their failure to do so makes them all the more poignant reminders of the futility of fame and fortune. As unsuccessful attempts to defeat time they thus become the ultimate emblem of time's destructive power. And in so far as this has been one of the central aims of portraiture throughout history – preservation of identity, aid to memory – they even seem to exemplify the ultimate vanity of portraiture itself.

In conclusion, let me add this well-intended admonishing thought: when faced with portraits of unknown people, one could – like any diligent art historian – attempt to find out the identity of the various sitters. But perhaps we should sometimes pause instead. Perhaps we need to heed the words of TJ Clark in his book *The Sight of Death*: 'Historians who constantly present their Scotland Yard credentials . . . never fail to miss seeing what the real crime was' (Clark 2006, p. 164). The real crime, in the case of my beloved portraits, is the one committed by Time. And it is a crime that eventually we ourselves will fall prey to. As W.H. Auden puts it cruelly but beautifully:<sup>17</sup>

"O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.

"In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where Justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.

"In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And Time will have his fancy  
To-morrow or to-day.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Maes (2015). There are some exceptions, though, including Clark (2006) and Elkins (2001). I should also note that philosophers have written extensively about expressiveness in art in general. But that's not the same thing as writing about being personally enchanted or overwhelmed by certain works of art.
2. Freud himself shared this view: 'I'm trying to relay something of who they are as a physical and emotional presence. I want the paint to work as flesh does' (Freud 2009).
3. 'Portraits are uncanny; they often give the impression of presence and haunt the space of the viewer' (Loh 2009, p. 360).

4. See [www.marcoanelli.com/portraits-in-the-presence-of-marina-abramovic/](http://www.marcoanelli.com/portraits-in-the-presence-of-marina-abramovic/) [Accessed 15 May 2019].
5. Borges recounts a very similar experience in his essay *A New Refutation of Time*. He spends the afternoon in Barracas, a barrio in the southeast of Buenos Aires, and comes to a street of low houses that farther away dwindles into the pampa and that, as he calls it, is made of ‘elemental clay, the clay of a still unconquered America’. The scene in front of him, he realizes, must be the same as it was thirty years ago. And he goes on: ‘The only noise in this vertiginous silence was the equally timeless sound of the crickets. The easy thought I am somewhere in the 1800s ceased to be a few careless words and became profoundly real. I felt dead, I felt I was an abstract perceiver of the world, (. . .) No, I did not believe I had traversed the pre-summed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I possessed the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word eternity’ (Borges 2010, p. 70).
6. Viewers do not stop believing that they are looking at a painting. So the sense of an encounter should not be explained in terms of an illusory belief. But whether it is instead best explained in terms of the imagination (see, for instance, Schroeder and Matheson 2006) or *alief* (Gendler 2010, 2012; Anscomb 2019) or in terms of some other (sub-doxastic) state, is an issue I wish to remain neutral on here.
7. If the figure is clumsily drawn or idealized it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to have the sense of an encounter. Equally, the effect will be absent in the case of miniature portraits (or small-size reproductions of larger portraits).
8. Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait (1434) or Jan Gossaert’s *Portrait of a Merchant* (1530) are good examples of portraits where period detail and setting help to demarcate the inside from the outside of the frame. They allow the sort of experience that T.J. Clark values so highly: ‘When I am in front of a picture the thing I most want is to enter the picture’s world; it is the possibility of doing so that makes pictures worth looking at for me. . . . It is a wish to exit from my own world of responses into another’ (Clark 2006, p. 222). By contrast, the portraits that I’m interested in appear to induce the opposite experience: it’s not we who seem to enter the picture’s world, but rather the picture’s subject who seems to enter our world.
9. The serious expression, betraying no particular emotion, also enhances the sense of mystery and will feed the viewer’s fascination in a similar way as Vermeer’s ironic *Girl with the Pearl Earring* does: ‘You can’t ever answer the question of what she’s thinking or how she’s feeling. If it were resolved, then you’d move onto the next painting. But it isn’t, so you turn back to it again and again, trying to unlock that mystery. That’s what all masterpieces do: we long to understand them, but we never will’ (Tracey Chevalier quoted in Sooke 2014). In addition, the seriousness may convey the impression, as David Davies has suggested to me, that these sitters are very much aware that their image will be seen beyond their deaths.
10. Cranston has argued that ‘the notion of dialogue defines the poetics of cinquecento portraiture’ (2000, p. 2). But I would argue that muteness or mutual silence is more crucial in the portraits I’m interested in.
11. Cf. Cranston: ‘Each member of the pair occupies the double role of subject and object’ (2000, p. 7) and this ‘makes each participant the beholder and the beheld simultaneously’ (2000, p. 7).
12. Cf. A.S. Byatt: ‘The portrait . . . is a paradox . . . a kind of false eternity’ (2001, p. 6).
13. See also Berger (2000) and Loh (2009, p. 360).

14. The phrase *memento (te) oblitum iri* can be translated as 'remember that you will be forgotten'. The form *oblitum iri* is unattested in classical Latin, but one can find a handful of medieval attestations. A more convoluted way to express the same thought is *Memento homines tui oblituros esse* ('remember that people will forget you'). I am grateful to Griet Galle and Guy Gulden-tops for their advice on this issue.
15. One may be reminded of the impact of Abramovic's performance on audi-ence members. As she herself observes: 'They're sitting there; I'm just a mir-ror of their own self' (quoted in Lader 2014).
16. I have taken this observation directly from Kristen Radtke's graphic novel *Imagine Wanting Only This* (2017).
17. 'As I Walked Out One Evening' copyright 1940 and copyright renewed 1968 by W.H. Auden; from *Collected Poems* by W.H. Auden. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

## Bibliography

- Anscomb, C.R. (2019). *On the Significance of Automaticity in Image-Making Practices*. PhD Thesis, School of Arts. Canterbury: University of Kent.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Howard, R. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Berger, H. (2000). *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renais-sance*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Berger, J. (1969). The Changing View of Man in the Portrait. In: *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays*. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 41–47.
- Borges, J.L. (2010). A New Refutation of Time. In: Levine, S.J., ed., *On Mysti-cism*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Byatt, A.S. (2001). *Portraits in Fiction*. London: Vintage.
- Clark, T.J. (2006). *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Conty, L., George, N., and Hietanen, J.K. (2016). Watching Eyes Effects: When Others Meet the Self. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 45, 184–197.
- Cooper, T. (2017). Likeness, Presence and the Practice of Renaissance Portrait Drawing. In: Cooper, T. and Bolland, C. eds., *The Encounter: Drawings from Leonardo to Rembrandt*. London: National Portrait Gallery.
- Cranston, J. (2000). *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance*. Cam-bridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cumming, L. (2016). *The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velázquez*. London: Vintage.
- Elkins, J. (2001). *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. London: Routledge.
- Freeland, C. (2010). Philosophers. *The Philosophers' Magazine*, pp. 52–59.
- Freud, L. (2009). Interviewed by Michael Auping. Available from: [www.bridge-manimages.com/en-US/lucian-freud-michael-auping](http://www.bridge-manimages.com/en-US/lucian-freud-michael-auping) [Accessed May 14 2019].
- Gendler, T.S. (2010). *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gendler, T.S. (2012). Between Reason and Reflex: Response to Commentators. *Analysis*, 72, 799–811.



- Gombrich, E.H. (1945). Portrait Painting and Portrait Photography. In: Wengraf, P. ed., *Apropos Portrait Painting*. London: Lund Humphries, pp. 1–7.
- Hammer, M. (2007). *The Naked Portrait*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1975). *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1., trans. Knox, T.M. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jacobs, F.H. (2005). *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kulvicki, J.V. (2014). *Images*. London: Routledge.
- Lader, R. (2014). The Artist Is Present and the Emotions Are Real: Time, Vulnerability, and Gender in Marina Abramovic's Performance Art. *WR: Journal of the CAS Writing Program*, Issue 6. Available from: [www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-6/lader/](http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-6/lader/) [Accessed 15 May 2019].
- Lewis, D. (2015). Putting Eyeballs on Billboards Might Help Stop Crime. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Available from: [www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/putting-eyeballs-billboards-might-help-stop-crime-180956394/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/putting-eyeballs-billboards-might-help-stop-crime-180956394/) [Accessed 14 May 2019].
- Loh, M.H. (2009). Renaissance Faciality. *Oxford Art Journal*, 32(3), 341–364.
- Maes, H. (2015). What Is a Portrait? *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 55(3), 303–322.
- Radtke, K. (2017). *Imagine Wanting Only This*. New York: Pantheon.
- Schroeder, T. and Matheson, C. (2006). Imagination and Emotion. In: Nichols, S. ed., *The Architecture of the Imagination New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 19–36.
- Sooke, A. (2014). Vermeer's Girl with the Pearl Earring: Who Is She? *BBC Culture*. Available from: [www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140701-who-was-the-mysterious-girl](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140701-who-was-the-mysterious-girl) [Accessed 14 May 2019].
- Spencer, R. (1976). Yousuf Karsh. *British Journal of Photography*, 123, 406–409.
- West, S. (2004). *Portraiture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Windsor, M. (2019). What Is the Uncanny? *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 59(1), 51–65.