



# David Freedberg

## Against Portraiture

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I have always been terrified of having my portrait taken. Since I am neither Charlton Heston nor Humphrey Bogart – and certainly not the face that launched a thousand ships – do I really want to see myself in all my physiognomic deficiency? I can scarcely bear to look at a photo of myself, even the handsomest, while Luca Del Baldo's keen and accurate adaptation of one, which makes me look better than any so far, I have only been able to look at once. For many years – at least ten – I resisted sending Luca a photograph of myself, despite his many courteous requests. In fact, I never did.

Of course, this may be my own problem, more for me and my therapist or psychoanalyst than for anyone else. But I persist in the feeling that I am better represented by what I stand for and by my actions than what I look like. To me there has always seemed to be a disjunct between appearance, between inadequate physical resemblance, and the high and lofty aims for which I hope I strive. It is all too easy to understand the sentiment behind the inscription on Dürer's great portrait of Erasmus declaring that his writings show him better than the image itself, or of the statement beneath his lovely head of Melanchthon to the effect that while Dürer's skilled hand was able to show the features of the reformer, it could not paint his mind. Indeed, in the portrait of Erasmus it is the words that are framed on the print, not the portrait itself.

Then too there's the question of the spoken word. Might this not represent me better than any picture? One remembers the lines of the great Dutch poet Vondel challenging Rembrandt not to be content with just painting the face of the Mennonite preacher Cornelis Ansló, but to paint the voice as well: "O Rembrandt paint Cornelis's voice: the visible side is the least of him" the quatrain begins. To know him is to know his words – the words he preaches. It is a plea by a poet for the superiority of language over painting (at least when it comes to best representing someone known for his oratory). So then Rembrandt paints Cornelis with a large bible open in front of him, his mouth just open, his hand gesturing, and his wife, head lightly cocked, wrapt in attention as she listens to him, so that we too seem to hear Cornelis's voice (even if we do not understand his words). O! What painting and portraiture cannot do! To paint sound – this, of course, was the great achievement of the classical sculptors like Myron, whose cows seemed to moo at their very beholders, as the poets of the Greek Anthology so often reminded one. These may be the usual commonplaces of the comparison between the senses, the *paragone* between different arts, but in the end Rembrandt's visual art, his portraiture, trumped all the others. So too, of course, did Dürer's. Who now remembers the inscriptions on his portraits? Who now can cite more than one line of Erasmus's writings (even if pressed), or a single word of Melanchthon? But we all remember their *faces* – and also, perhaps, their garb. Somehow, as another old cliché goes, these portraits bring the dead alive; in some way or another they bring them back to us. And they do so more effectively and more intimately, for the most part, than their writings. But how? How much does it take to do so? Not much.

There is, of course, no shortage of precedents. Reservations about portraiture punctuate the history of portraiture, whether in the Hadith, the Talmud or the entire Western tradition. I share most of them. I feel like a seventeenth-century Jansenist, not so much fearful of emulating God's unique creative power in making man in his own image, but afraid of the vanity of representing oneself (or of having oneself represented). Perhaps all this is the consequence of having been brought up as a Jew in a Calvinist society, in which resistance to figuring the human face never lay far beneath the surface and aligned one with all those religions that share this resistance.

Or is it indeed just a matter of vanity, this notion that I am unworthy of being portrayed? After all, there can scarcely be a portraitist in the world who does not understand the difference between verisimilitude in the depiction of outward appearance on the one hand and inner character on the other. Once upon a time, accuracy of physiognomic representation might have been the chief aim of the portraitist (and perhaps it still is in certain quarters), but probably even Jan van Eyck, that absolute master of precision and translucency, would himself have been able to assure me that whatever goodness of character I had would come across in the good portrait, or in this particular depiction of my physiognomy. Accuracy of representation, seeming verisimilitude, need not exclude such goodness. Van Eyck, like many other artists, may not have not scanted the aim of replication of a face in the form of a close mirror likeness, but he would still have recognized that the better part of the sitter was not a matter of pictorial resemblance alone (or at all).

As we all know by now, resemblance is not the central issue – except perhaps in the context of crime and the courts. But even then, as we know from the flaws in the way identities are supposedly established, perceived resemblance depends on the beholder and on his or her prejudices.

What is at stake is not the illusion of body and person, but the illusion of psyche and soul. That, above all, is what the artist must convey. We may say that we admire the manipulations of paint in Lucian Freud's fat people, for example, but still we look for more. We seek to discern something about their character. The presence of the soul of the sitter is not the presence of the body of the sitter.

It is true that these days, in the age of digitization and the internet, we often find ourselves attempting to ascertain the character or intelligence of a sitter through their image – as, say, in the case of an executive who must make a preliminary assay of character of a number of applicants for a job, or when we ourselves are curious about the character of an artist or writer about whom we want to know more (as if that were somehow relevant to their art), or, say, about the personality and ethos of a potential date. Often enough we come to conclusions about character pretty much on the basis of visual appearance alone, as if we still believed in the ancient traditions of physiognomy. But as we fre-

quently learn, sometimes to our own cost, accuracy of judgement about such matters is not guaranteed, and we don't in general align such judgement with esthetic judgement. No one who makes judgements about the character of someone in this way could ever commit to the view that it correlates with the excellence or otherwise of the art.

Even though I refused to supply Luca with a photograph of myself, he persisted in his search, found one on his own, and wrought his own magic on my image. "I have always been terrified of having my portrait taken", I wrote at the beginning. The notion of having one's picture *taken* – to use the English verb – could not be more telling. Many anthropologists will have encountered societies in which people believe that to take a picture of someone is to take their soul away, or even to take possession of it. The literature of the Americas is full of examples. Indeed, anyone who has been to a Native American ritual ceremony will be familiar with this belief. It was one of the burdens of my concern when I wrote about Aby Warburg's famous expedition of 1895-96 to take photographs of the Hopi peoples (whose looks, as his notes make clear, he so admired). But I am not a Native American, and I could not honestly claim that I am afraid of having my soul taken away from me by the process of image-making. So what really is the root of this resistance to being portrayed?

Perhaps in the end, my reservations are indeed too vain and solipsistic. In Luca's picture of me I don't like the wrinkles and the bags under my eyes, or the quality and color of my complexion, and I wish my eyes were brighter, more open and clearer; but in aesthetic terms I do indeed marvel – as, say, in the case of Rembrandt – at the tenderness and subtlety of the *painting* of the bags under the eyes, the impasted areas, the deep furrows across face and brow, the traction of the brush across the wrinkles and in the sagging flesh. I acknowledge the art, and forget what it lacks in terms of accuracy of description, for in this picture art transcends mere flattery. I marvel at it as a work of art, not as a mere representation of the self. It is the art that matters, not the object, or the subject of the object. Indeed, if I take myself out of this portrait, it would be even better – or so I vainly think.

But there is more. I don't think that anyone now believes that art is a matter of illusion (as Gombrich himself once protested to me in horror at this frequent misreading of *Art and Illusion*). Rather than the illusion

of reality, or the tricks of representation in conveying it, what is at stake is the illusion of presence – and a particular kind of presence at that: a metaphorical and a metaphysical one, that of the soul. And the presence of the soul of a sitter in a portrait cannot merely be the illusion of their body.

There is yet another complex demand upon the maker of the portrait. It is a demand that helps us realize more fully the vanity and solipsism of our dissatisfactions with portraiture, our sense of its deficiency. In the end, portraits are not only for those whom they are *of*, but for those others whom they are *for*. They are for friends, for family, for history, for remembrance. They are not just for us, but for others. They make absent friends present; they bring the dead alive for those who come after. One of the foundational ancient and medieval justifications of painting and image-making was that they serve as aids to recollection, and to the fragility and weakness of memory.

Erasmus himself wrote vividly of a medallion portrait of his friend Willibald Pirckheimer that such images “bring my friend Willibald more vividly before me. The medal hangs on the right-hand wall of my bedroom and the painting on the left. Whether I write or walk about, Willibald is always before my eyes – so much so that, even if I wanted to forget him, I could not. But in fact there is nothing which I hold so firmly in my mind as the memory of my friends. And there is something else which pleases me greatly – when my friends come to visit we often begin to talk about you because the portrait is there”<sup>1</sup>

Art is for memory but also for conversation. And paintings such as Luca Del Baldo’s remind us not only of the faces of our absent friends, but also of their company, and the kinds of conversation their images still engender. Even though we may prefer to be remembered by our words and our occasional acts of kindness rather than by our features, the power of images, as these portraits show, still brings us closer to who we are, *in bono et in malo*.

Even a single distinctive feature may suffice to remind us of a sitter. But to convey the soul of the sitter we need something more: something that can convey, in the sparest way possible, their character – the face of empathy, say, the gentle smile, the expression of compassion, the willingness to help.

This is the great challenge. Visual resemblance counts for little besides

this. The artist chooses to extract something noble from what he sees. She or he offers cues not plenitude, not visual reflection, but a visual reminder that can be as minimal as it is expansive.

What kind of pictures, we may ask ourselves, most successfully do this? The portraits in this book, portraits of people who have sought to understand the mysteries of art all their lives, offer us clues. Let us take them up and consider how they fare as measures of the soul. In them, and in this task, we may discover some larger reasons to set aside my arguments against portraiture.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my friends Larry Silver and Shira Brisman, both of whom – through their writings – happened to remind me of these words just as I was concluding this essay.

