

THE PORTRAIT

'Remember that a painting — before being a horse, nude or some sort of anecdote — is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.

— Maurice Denis (1870-1943)

When an artist paints a portrait there are many decisions to be made. What is intended by the portrait? Does it tell us about the public face of the person portrayed? Is it an official portrait? Will it tell us about the work that that person does in public life? Perhaps they are scholars, painters, clergymen. Was the portrait a private one not made for official reasons, but to be seen in a private home or room? In what ways does the artist let us know how to look at the portrait?

George III –

Here we have the King of England in 1757. He doesn't wear a crown but there are some clues, apart from his name in the top right hand corner, to help us guess who he was. His clothes are very fine. The ermine cloak and ermine lining of his coat indicate great wealth. Ermine is also a symbol of purity. Allan Ramsay the artist has been careful to give the figure an elevated position — we seem to look up to look at his face. George III turns slightly away from us and his gaze does not include us. Although we are obviously meant to look at him in all his finery he is, of course, too important to acknowledge our presence. Queen Charlotte by contrast looks at us. Here again the angle of our view is significant. Queen Charlotte is seen to be more accessible to us. It is interesting also to notice how much of the available space on the canvas these two people take up.



King George III c.1757
Allan Ramsay (1713-1784)



Queen Charlotte
Allan Ramsay (1713-1784)



Napoleon I c.1820
Bertel Thorvaldsen (1768-1844)

Our attitude to a person in a portrait is established by:

- 1 Our sense of whether we are looking at a public portrait or a private one. Do the people meet our eyes or are we "eavesdropping" on them in a private moment?
- 2 How much space they fill on the canvas.
- 3 How they relate to our eye level. Do we look up to them or down on them?
- 4 How they present their bodies to us. Frontally, reclining, casually, formally, at an angle, standing or sitting.
- 5 What objects are shown with the people to give us clues about their importance or their life style.
- 6 Whether it is an idealized portrait or it is frank and descriptive.

Napoleon I – by Bertel Thorvaldsen 1768/70-1844

This portrait tells us little about Napoleon the man and a great deal of how he was viewed as a leader of the French people. It is an idealized portrait. He is made to look like a soldier of ancient Rome — he wears laurel leaves on his head, a victor's crown, and his head and shoulders or bust rides on the back of an eagle. The eagle was an ancient symbol of power and victory and was represented on the standards of the Roman legions. So the artist here has drawn from his knowledge of ancient Rome, something that was very fashionable to do in the nineteenth century when he made this bust.

Cleopatra – by Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema

Here we have an imaginary portrait of a woman we've all heard about. She was the Queen of Egypt. Her portrait tells us something of the taste of the artist who made it and the time in which he lived. He was a painter living during the Victorian era in England. Cleopatra was a woman who was legendary for her beauty and seduction, things that were not overtly praised by society in Queen Victoria's time. This portrait makes her look like a seductress. The small size of the painting and the sense (created by the frame) that we are peeping into a secret place makes this different from an official portrait of a queen. Very likely this painting was made to hang in the study of a gentleman of the day!

Compare this portrait with the dry-point by James Jacques Tissot 1836-1903, *Soiree d'Ete* (Summer Evening). The woman here is not even given a name. We feel very much as though we are party to a very special and private view of her as she sits lost in her own thoughts in a summer garden. Notice how her reclining figure is turned away from us and that her eyes are downcast. Tissot was also a Victorian artist and some of the same attitudes present in Alma-Tadema's work can be found here.



Cleopatra c.1877
Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912)



Summer Evening 1881
James Jacques Tissot (1836-1902)

Portrait of Betty Curnow – 1942 by Rita Angus

This painting was made by the artist Rita Angus while staying with the poet Allen Curnow and his wife. This portrait has been described as a "portrait of generations". The artist and the sitter selected items from around the house to place in the background to symbolize Betty Curnow's position as a mother — a link between the past and the future. Even the smallest details have an underlying meaning. Betty Curnow is married, as her wedding ring indicates. The reproduction of *The Corn Harvest*, a painting by Bruegel hints at her role as a mother. The small portrait behind her is of her father and the other painting, done by Rita Angus, shows the landscape of her childhood. Do the books on the wall behind her suggest that she is a writer or scholar, or do they refer to the absent man? Portraits of women often tell us more of the men they are associated with than of themselves as individuals. Look at Miss Mary Christina Windham, fourth daughter of Admiral William Windham of Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk 1828. The title tells us that Miss Windham had a sailor for a father and to reinforce this in the background Sir William Beechey has painted the sea. The lady however, has status. We can guess at this from her elegant and rich clothes. Do you think you could sit in the position Miss Windham has been placed by the artist? Does she seem to have authority? When you look at these two portraits of women, what do their clothes suggest? We think that Miss Windham is rich but perhaps she is also wearing her best clothes to have her portrait painted. Do you think Betty Curnow is wearing her best clothes and what does this tell us about the artist's intention? Perhaps people's attitude to portraits has altered in the 100 or so years between the two works being made.

Society's attitudes to men and women are revealed in the portraits artists have created over the centuries. Some of the earliest portraits made come from Egypt. Here we see a portrait of a royal couple. Notice how large the man is in relation to the woman. See also that she is kneeling while he stands and that she leans against him as if for support. This "convention" of showing status or relationship is not universal. It simply follows the set of beliefs that exist in any given society. They are visual ways in which groups of people describe their worlds. You will find that these conventions are so close to us that we accept them, often without thought. Advertisements in our contemporary world use many of these conventions. Because we understand them we don't need words to explain and a message comes through to us, sometimes unconsciously. Most portraits show some of the aspects that are discussed in this exhibition.

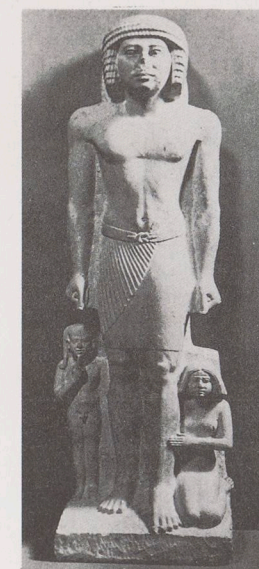
Below: Two examples of contemporary magazine advertisements



Portrait of Betty Curnow 1942
Rita Angus (1908-1970)



Portrait of Miss Mary Christina Windham, one of the daughters of Admiral William Windham of Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk 1828
Sir William Beechey, RA (1753-1839)



Akhy and his family
From Sakkarā
late Vth Dynasty
Collection of the Cairo Museum

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An Education
Service Exhibition

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