

## **PORTRAITURE**

By Henrik Sahl

*From a conceptual point of view, a portrait is the picture of a specific person or a group of people, whose likeness is clearly recognizable. It may take the form of a painting, drawing, photograph, relief, or sculpture.*

*Portraits have been known as relief on coins and as statues of Roman emperors, Egyptian pharaohs, and others before Christ. Paintings designed to depict specific living people have been known since the Twelfth Century, and in the Renaissance it became more common to paint minor royalty, noblemen, and prosperous citizens, besides monarchs and church dignitaries. It was possible by that time to preserve a likeness after death in a drawing, a print, or a painting. Paintings had by then reached such a high standard that to have one's likeness taken was tantamount to being immortalised. Therefore, some kind of compensation was often added, like elements with a short life: flowers, fruit, fish, meat, etc., sometimes a direct memento mori with a fly, skull, parts of the skeleton, or inscriptions in stone.*

*In the late Seventeenth Century and throughout the Eighteenth Century, it became more common for the artist to paint persons from the lower classes, peasants and artisans were put into dramatic and realistic motifs, with persons who could be easily recognised. The daguerreotype and ferrotypes of 150 years ago, and later photography, brought the painted portrait major competition, and since the 1930s its status has diminished or, at best, fluctuated somewhat. Art academies today have often abandoned portraiture as a discipline, but renewed interest in the new millennium may change that. Portrait photography has similarly seen competition from video and film, latest from reality documentation of all kinds via the news multimedia cell telephones.*

*Commensurate with today's electronic documentation and vast picture*

*production, durability has lessened substantially. Printed pictures, photographs of today, posters, etc., vanish after ten years or so, or at best a few decades. We have thus reached a position where a photograph commissioned today will not last for a hundred years as those taken a hundred years ago have. But a portrait painted on canvas in acrylic paint or, better, oils with pigments of good quality will last for a very long time and remain almost unchanged centuries from now.*

*A portrait painter must take several factors into account.*

### **Likeness**

*A fundamental and major quality of a painted portrait is the likeness to the person portrayed. If this is not good, a fundamental element is missing – at least in the short run. An appraisal of portraits painted in earlier times and in other contexts often leads to the conclusion that the viewer has no knowledge of the subject of the portrait. For this reason, likeness may not always be considered, but several other qualities of course will. A fundamental element in the public exposure of all portraits is the assessment by the persons viewing the portrait. This is going on all the time, either subconsciously or consciously: "This portrait is very good, this one is poor. I like this or that very much, but the green colour and the perspective are really bad, etc."*

*Physiognomy, body position, clothing, and background can contribute much to the portrait likeness. The eyes and area around the eyes particularly attract the viewer's attention, but the likeness here will often be acceptable. Typically, the most difficult areas are around the lower part of the nose, easily made too large, too small, too dark or too light, and especially the mouth and its shape. It has been said very strikingly by John Singer Sargent that "a portrait is a painting of a person where there is something a little wrong with the mouth". This is partly because the expression around the eyes is more static or slow changing, whereas the mouth and the area around it are more often in constant movement. We often see today broadly smiling faces on group photos. This is most often not suitable on a painted portrait. Portraits from the*

*Fourteenth Century onwards show that very few persons have parted lips and then just enough to allow a glimpse of teeth, especially in young women and children.*

*Besides a good likeness, the painted portrait should show characteristic features of the sitter. This may be difficult or impossible for the artist without a primary knowledge of the subject unless he or she acquires sufficient knowledge through the process of painting. If the subject is a public figure, the known sides ("image") can of course be put into the portrait. Throughout the history of portraiture, a certain amount of extra beautifying has always been done, especially in the case of women, where evident physiognomic signs of wear-and-tear like scars, wounds, slack skin and rolls of fat, and tooth defects have been omitted. But less charming signs of age, like thickening of the neck, grey hair, liver spots, etc., may also be substituted with younger equivalents. This must not be taken too far, or else the likeness may be compromised. If the artist paints directly from their actual visual impression with the intention of achieving the greatest likeness, the result may be a portrait giving the viewer the impression of a person somewhat older than the actual chronological age. This, of course, is not opportune and the artist must take pains to compensate for it during the painting process. The way the hair is usually arranged, a characteristic pose of the head, clothes and jewellery, typical of the sitter, and so on, all help to promote the likeness. A series of photographs taken over the preceding five to ten years, plus recent photos and drawings together with sittings will often provide a good background for a portrait showing a person very like the real one.*

#### *Choice of colour*

*This is very important for the general impression the painting leaves and for major static or dynamic elements in the portrait. A commonly used and neutral palette showing all the subtle shades of skin colour and distinctions could be: indigo blue, red madder, burnt sienna, golden ochre, flesh ochre, flesh tint, Naples red-yellow and titanium white. These can be supplemented by other colours for background, clothes, sky and cloud formation, and other objects. Large areas of yellow, red, or green may provoke certain reactions in the*

*persons looking at the painting. Green is especially a difficult colour to apply as background in a portrait, it can greatly affect the perception of the colour of the skin. Some people are very fond of the primary colours, others prefer the secondary ones. The permutations are many and individual preferences and attitudes numerous. In classical painting, a relatively dark background was applied to emphasise the colour of the skin and the contrast of the face. But this is not very common today.*

*Special and very striking effects can be achieved with certain palettes. For instance, one with the colours ivory black, cobalt blue, magenta, lemon yellow, and white. This was used with great success by the artists Kristian Zahrtmann and Jens Ferdinand Willumsen.*

### **Light and shade**

*A single primary light, with a smaller, secondary reflecting light, will often be a good choice for portraiture. But any possible light-shadow combination can be used. Rembrandt's shade and light with a low light source has a dramatic, piquant effect. It is important that the face is given sufficient contrast, either by the choice of colour or light-shadow dynamics. It should be possible to separate out at least five distinct zones from the darkest part to the lightest. This may not be the best contrast for children and young people. Several classical portraits have a major highlight located outside the face, in the collar or some part of the shirt that is distinctly white. Behind the darkest part of the face, the background is lighter, and vice versa: behind a lighter part of the face, the background could be darker. The colour of the skin and the lightness or darkness of the hair may be important for the choice of surroundings, the colour impression, and the amount of light in the portrait.*

### **Dress, background, and surroundings**

*The possibilities are numerous, according to what impression the artist wants the portrait to leave. The effect of a portrait can become very different by adding a relatively simple and tranquil background contra a detailed collage*

*illustrating, "what did you in life?". To paint a good portrait is also very much about depicting clothes of the proper size and colour, jewellery, and signal effects that tell a story about the person: a particular situation, an epoch, substantial events, glory, honour, and success. The possibilities of self-scenery are major and sometimes they are so interesting (to the persons looking at the portrait) that they distract attention from the physiognomy and likeness of the subject. Much of the time and effort spent on painting a portrait can be taken up by depicting background, objects, and dress. This, of course, increases the costs, but not necessarily the value, of the portrait.*

### ***Body position, posture, and figures***

*A portrait may show the subject in full figure, two thirds of it, the upper part of the body with or without hands, or perhaps just the head and neck or part of the face, depending on the overall composition of the picture. In earlier times, symbols of power were shown with the subject in three-quarter pose and hand on hip, together with weapons, mantle, etc. Today this may be too direct. Power and position are expressed in other ways, but it is still necessary that the final portrait expresses the status of the person portrayed. If the upper extremities and hands are to be shown in the portrait, the position of the hand and fingers are very important to the total impression of the portrait.*

### ***Price, picture size***

*The costs, time, and efforts spent on painting a portrait depend on the size of the canvas, the amount of colour, the quality of the colour, and the number of brush strokes, as these are proportional to the painted area and the area of the canvas. Depending on motive, composition, etc., some sizes are more optimal than others. A very small picture creates special challenges. Similarly, a size bigger than 100 x 150 cm requires a specially constructed frame, and even larger canvasses can only be handled, if the atelier is sufficiently high-ceilinged. In most cases, between 40 and 120 cm would be the preferred size for most portraits. Men should be painted in life size, perhaps even in oversize; for women, in most cases preferably smaller than life size, sometimes a little*

*oversized. In certain cases, where extraordinary effects are intended, women's portraits should be done in plain oversize.*

### ***Painting technique and style***

*Different artists will have different characteristics and individual styles that can only be varied within certain limits. Some paint photorealism with even brush movements and colours, others have a much broader hand. The individual artist's technique is probably seen in most portraits, not only in the painting technique, but also in the choice of colours, composition, and pose of the subject. This can be so characteristic that it becomes supreal or even close to caricature. Examples are El Greco's and Stanley Spencer's styles in religious motifs with elongated figures with long faces and long extremities vs short figures with round faces and heavy extremities. Some artists paint with striking contrasts, drawings of main lines and dark separations, others have smooth, sometimes pointillist techniques with areas of reduced contrast and colours moving from one balance to another, almost unnoticeably. Most artists are to be found somewhere in between with their own characteristics and styles. But, as said, it is only possible within certain limits to control this, an issue that should be very obvious already, when commissioning an artist to paint a portrait.*

### ***Drafts, drawings, preliminary painting, and sittings***

*The well known long sittings, numerous sketch drawings, and preliminary paintings of earlier times have today been superseded by series of photographs with fewer additional drawings and painted draft pictures. Some artists add a video recording, so as to get a better impression of the subject's personality, mannerisms, and body language. Repeated sittings put a strain on the subject, as well as on the artist. Today a combination of work in the atelier with and without the subject is thought to be the best solution. Final hours of adjustment of important details with a live sitting is always necessary.*

*A good portrait with a good likeness and many details will take more than 100 hours of work over several sessions to get the best result, and some part of*

*the work will require the canvas to be completely dry. The execution of a painted portrait is therefore a process that can go on for months, half a year, often longer. The final drying, eventually completed with varnishing, will mean even more time. This can sometimes be difficult for an impatient person, who has commissioned the work, to understand.*

### **Closing remarks**

*Portraiture has sometimes been considered reactionary and retrospective. It has been called static, fully developed, bourgeois, conservative, self-centered, and without vision. All these labels may be understandable from certain angles, from others and overall they are much too simple, in several ways superficial, and in others erroneous. Portraiture has passed the test of time, it has survived in spite of difficult periods, and is now flourishing.*

*Elevated above these attitudes and the politics of art is the human face, and the dynamic frieze put into a portrait is ever fascinating. An instant that in expression ties past and future, tells a story, links space and time, life and death in a moment of eternity with all the good and the bad. The unspoken but insistent message calls for fascination, fantasy, and reflection.*