

# THE PAINTING OF A PORTRAIT

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**A**PPROACH to an adequate discussion of this theme implies a harking back to beginnings which have left their impress upon races and empires of whose existence we are made aware only by stone carvings unearthed. Such are, we believe, but remnants of a finer, if more fugitive, art which decorated their homes. Among these more delicate arts would necessarily be likenesses of heroes and beloved members of the family.

What would seem to be the concept underlying the pictorial records handed down to us from earlier civilizations?

The cave-man's respect for animals of the chase is clearly indicated in his drawings of them. This can be understood because they furnished a real stimulus to adventure, and constant, even fierce, challenge to his prowess in hunting. Admiration was, we cannot doubt, the inspiration of his art. It may be assumed that with the planting of the garden and gathering of its products, with the herding of flocks, and other peaceful occupations, came cessation of the nomadic instinct and the evolution of community life. There is little strain upon the imagination in noting the growing self-respect in members of the community as they reaped the rewards of industry. This self-respect is concomitant with a display of taste and artistic skill in the shaping and decorating of articles of utility. The organization of home life and the family would exalt the virtues of human affection. A transfer of respect from wild animals to the human was just as natural, and it is indicated by the preservation of images of loved ones; hence the art of portraiture. That the practice of portraiture is very ancient needs no further argument, for the desire to secure these likenesses is native to the race. Cultures, empires and histories have bridged the centuries until now, but they have not altered nor even invaded the domain of sentiment in a demand for art memorials. Portraiture as a profession is entitled to be discussed, not only because of its antiquity, but because of the expectation entertained that, for deeper reasons, it will be found deserving of esteem.

The painting of a portrait may be either a Quixotic adventure or a spiritual exercise. A joust at a windmill would be a sane exploit in comparison with inexpert attempts at a pictorial compendium of the human countenance, while the reverent approach

of an adept to such a task may bring enlightenment to himself, and a respect for his subjects that will make it a spiritual process. A full half century of study and practice has led me to the feet of masters in many lands; while experience has brought the wisdom that is aware of how little one knows, and the desire to tell of what is alive in our nation's art, for encouragement to future students of this admirable craft.

In this review we may wisely ask, "What is the difference between a likeness and a portrait?" Most people are unaware of the distinction that is made in these similar products of the artist's pencil. Exhibition catalogues are not always free from blame in the premises. The delineation of a likeness of a person in any pictorial medium is comparatively simple; but the production of a portrait is a complicated procedure. A portrait involves not only an exact record of features and form, but a consideration of the facts of the person's life surveyed under varying changes of time and circumstance. These changing conditions may be subtle, even elusive, yet they are always meaningful and important. A summoning to my service of the facts of experience will meet with approval as a safe line of approach to conclusions. I am, however, obliged to interject at this point, that those facts are much more numerous than I am allowed, by reasonable professional discretion, to quote.

In attempting to record happy experiences, an appropriate metaphor flashes into mind: it is of the maplewoods of my boyhood, where trees of memory are "tapped", and the "run" of recollections to be gathered is so copious that volumes might be filled; but a boiling and reboiling down will bring a "sugaring-off" into what follows. How I came to make portrait painting a specialty is told elsewhere.

To begin with: where stands portraiture among the other arts of the painter? A delightfully written book by Birge Harrison on "Landscape Painting" claims for that specialty the highest place in American, if not in the world's, pictorial art. A dozen eminent artists are ready, I dare assume, to champion his claims, with the enthusiasm so characteristic of artists in all fields, and so essential to their highest accomplishments. I would keep their ardour at white heat. You will certainly find similar raptures in every art specialty, and will commend without controversy their enjoyment by every specialist.

Strolling one day through the forest of Fontainebleau, I stood for a few moments in an open space, and suddenly noted an almost invisible streak shoot through the long grass into the forest beyond.

The distant, plaintive trill of a hunting-horn announced the hounds off on the scent of a wild boar. Presently a string of dogs appeared, mutely following the trail of that swift flash of a minute before. I felt a chill of the spine at the sight of the uncanny bewitchment of the hounds as they pursued the wild hog's trail in their mad passion for the animal's life. I realized, while standing there, that this compulsion had a counterpart in the lure of the artist pursuing his study of some more excellent subject or quality in his themes. No one, indeed, can accomplish anything worth while in the product of brush and palette, or in anything else, for that matter, who is not an enthusiast.

The many specialties are a result of particular enthusiasms. Brett was happy only when painting the sea; and we can understand this as we study the shimmering light mirrored in his "Britannia's Realm". The rush and sweep of Hemey's "Spindrift" have the very spirit of the sea, and Henry Moore's pictures have the lift and swish of spume-spray when "cat's paws" are in the air. It requires a specialist to portray the multiplicity of moods in ocean's wastes of water, just as it needs a specialist to depict the beauties which appear in Harrison's, Bruce's, or any other miracles of the landscape painter's art, where nature's glories are expressed.

Again, one can conceive of Paul Potter, Rosa Bonheur, Van Marck, Swann, or Thompson Seton, in devotion to the animal world, talking us into mesmeric aberrations over pictures painted, and yet to be painted, of animal life. They will tell you that Art's proper concern is not so much with nature played upon by wind and sun and season only, as it is with active, sentient animal life swayed by impulse and motion, if not by thought which borders closely upon that of the human. It must be acknowledged that sympathy with creatures of the wild, or with man's dumb playmates as themes for the artist, is keen and commendable. Are we not consciously lifted higher again in a contemplation and study of the human so "fearfully and wonderfully made"? Has not the artist's scope overleaped many limitations in entering a field at once so vast and so varied?

Think of the consummate grace of the form, its beauty of curve and tint, and especially of the passion of soul and aspiration of spirit that can be expressed in action! Think, too, what an inspiration the human being offers the philosopher-painter in the realm of allegory, where abstract themes of a more or less spiritual import can be treated visually, just as music composers make their themes impressively audible or vocal to the ear!

While the painter's canvas may tell many truths through allegory, the annals of man's activities which present situations called events also furnish the artist with valuable pictorial opportunity. Historical incidents are capable of noble, picturesque, and even imaginative treatment. Yet these two branches of figure painting may spread apart like great limbs from a parent tree. The relationship of the allegorical painter, who paints images of fancy, is not intimate with the historical painter who paints images of facts. "The Last Judgment", by Michael Angelo, for instance, has little kinship with Maclise's "Meeting of Wellington and Blucher at Waterloo". The motives are wide as the poles apart. At the same time, there is occasionally to be noted a striking analogy in the treatment of themes by the allegorical and by the historical painter. This analogy is, for example, evident in the "Siege of Jerusalem", painted by Kaulbach, the dreamer, in which he presents the horrors of slaughter and pillage in the city, while above, on the same canvas, is pictured a vision of spiritual forces contending in the air.

After all, it must be admitted that the weaving of allegories into noble pictorial art would seem to be a loftier order than is the dramatic portrayal, no matter how splendidly done, of the story of the deeds of men. May not the allegorical painter, therefore, be given preference before the historical painter? Yet, remember, the most careful regard must be had for the artist's capacity of feeling deeply, and rendering truly, the spirit and dignity of his theme; for, as Grace says, "One man may gloriously exalt a mushroom or bank of moss in painting it; another might scandalize Minerva by his coarse and crude representation".

In great picture motives supplied to painters by the *genus homo*, is there not one specialty offered by man's personality or individuality? In other words, is there not a field for the portraitist? Amongst the "seats of the mighty" is there not a chair or a throne for the painter of portraits? Let us consider this enquiry in a few paragraphs.

The approach to a study of portraiture must not be in a casual manner, for portraiture cannot be picked up and mastered in any bravura style. There are many efforts at making portraits which are commendable, and others which, while sincere enough, are not too intelligent, to say the least. I am reminded of the day our village was invaded by a hurdy-gurdy man, and as he played, a burro became much interested. I noted the set of his ears whose forward thrust indicated profound concentration. Others laughed at my exclamation, "What an ear for music that donkey has"!



The unconscious gesture of those ears was masterful; but the gesture in this instance carried with it no claim or pretence to more than ordinary appreciation of music; one knows very well that it takes more than gesture to evolve a musician, poet or portraitist. I affirm that, while most people can intelligently appreciate those arts which touch personality, the mastery of the arts means a long and toilsome climb up the steeps of self-denial and sacrifice on the one hand, and on the other a deep delving into the soul of things.

The study is illuminating at every step. We find at once that men are more than elemental entities; they are tremendously complex in physical, mental and spiritual being. Circumstances, we see, strongly influence the actions of men, and govern their achievements; and a man's environment stamps itself upon face and frame. Beginning at infancy, the child makes the best of hereditary and environing conditions, feels eagerly, and wrestles continuously with those chances which mould him into a man and the man into a hero.

Surround a man with the conditions of farm life, for example, as he takes up its tasks, its toils performed in sun and rain; soon you read "farmer" all over him. The same thing is true of men in avocations which have no concern with weather or manual toil. The lines and scars on Cromwell's face, he said, were carved by his wrestlings with poverty and other adverse influences, external and internal, that had opposed his rise to eminence. You may read in a man's features the imprint of his journeyings, battlings and buffetings, and his face and bearing may wear the nobility of triumph, the glory of self-conquest, a kingly air.

Spiritual influences interest him. He draws inspiration from them, and power for a useful life. These secret forces, directed by his will, mould his character and become recognizable in the positive features of his personality; indeed, he would be incomplete, he would not be himself without them. He rises, through these inspirational influences, in spite of hereditary infirmities, in energy and commanding dignity. By their aid he organizes and creates situations to be recorded as events of history. He reveals attributes once supposed to belong alone to the deities of old.

There has come to my studio the master-work of a divine artisan; a being that possesses potential godhood; who says to one "Go", and he goes; to another "Come", and he comes; one who for diversion goes careering in the underseas, or into the upper air; who, when weary, draws music from the ether, and for pastime chats with kindred at the Antipodes. I am confronted with a problem of infinite meaning. Can I limn this figure without

painting what he is? Then I must paint what he has done, for its story is traced on feature and frame. I must paint also what he would do, for I read that declaration in his countenance.

The truth is, a sort of dare is put up to the portraitist by the knowledge that man's place in the universe has but to be questioned and his self-respect at once makes claim to first notice among all the creatures that people the earth. He is first in genius, in power, and in responsibility. If as fellow-men we regard him in this light, as artists we must so paint him, and this compulsion ennobles at once the vocation of the portrait painter.

The place of the portrait painter beside the world's historians is also clear. An historian usually describes events in which appear certain personalities brought into relief through happenings all more or less caused or directed by human will; but in painting an historical picture, the artist focuses in it a crucial moment of action, or emphasizes a vital personality in the drama pictured. The action is painted probably to glorify its hero, as, for example, Wellington at Waterloo, or Napoleon at Marengo, with the hero as a focal accent in the picture. Is it not as high a privilege, and is it not a subtler task, to make a portrait study of the hero himself whose thought and will inspired or controlled the historical action? The privilege and the task will be understood when we consider that, in painting the man, the action and the history are painted together with him. I am not now discussing men whose names may have arisen upon a wave-crest of events which has been lifted up by winds of chance, or through the planning and work of others. Such are not entitled to heroes' fame; but, on the other hand, the world has many unheralded heroes who have not sought public acclaim, however well their names deserve it.

Again, while in one respect the character *is* the man, we are yet aware that man, the ego, has the making of his own character. Character is developed through the force of its owner's mind. While circumstances may aid in making him what he is, he must seize and take advantage of his opportunities, and re-shape the events in attaining their mastery. The result is that he builds character as he takes possession of it, and wears it as he wears the garments or the orders which adorn him. Upon whom then, or on which, should we bestow the higher esteem, upon the man who has made or moulded events, or on the events themselves which have yielded to his directing hand? The answer may be given in Ruskin's pointed aphorism: "It is nobility of idea that ennobles art". By a not unnatural corollary, we award the coronet to the painter of men rather than to the painter of events, and bid him take the higher seat.

Everything, however, depends upon the ideals of the artist, upon the presence or absence of the capacity in him to see in his subject the full measure of true worth. The portrait painter, or artist, who has adequate respect for portraiture as a vocation, can ennoble in and through his work a personality which other less discerning men call commonplace; or, if he has missed his calling, he may brutalize an heir of the gods by painting him as a thing, or, baser still, may seek wholly to glorify himself in the picture painted, and forget the god he should have seen.

So important is the ideal which moves the painter that upon it depends the real distinction of the painter's product. Whether, therefore, the claim to be greatest art be made for allegory, or history, or the type of portraiture which, in its essentials, touches all three realms, matters little, except to sticklers for perferment. The great essential is, what does the painter put into his craft? And the answer lies in the more cogent question, What does he see in his subject? The portrait painter and the lover of art should alike put the question to himself: "What do I see in men"? If either painter or amateur sees men only as pawns to shuffle in a checkmate game; as marks for business exploiting; as voters in support of one's candidacy for place or emolument; as buyers for one's wares; or if he sees them but as mimes in life's masquerade, such concept or opinion of men will represent the sum of his expectation in their portraits. With Tennyson in *Launcelot and Elaine* one can say:—

As when a painter, poring on a face,  
Divinely thro' all hindrance finds the man  
Behind it, and so paints him that his face  
Lives for his children, ever at its best  
And fullest.

But I say further, if he can see in the face a record of life history; if he can trace in it the trend of purpose and lines of action; if he can perceive the developments in the countenance which have been shaped by the power of will, as sands are moulded in a river bed, the painter will paint not merely a portrait but the soul of his subject. And the amateur will be inspired thereby to look for and appreciate in his neighbour a higher and nobler order of man.

The portrait painter, I submit again, may and should be an historian, not only of the man, but of his race. Evidence of race inheritance is so indelibly etched into the visage and form in all branches of the human family, that the artist seldom fails to note those national hall-marks which the subject is usually proud to acknowledge.

To some a hardly less important service rendered by the painter is the recording of fashions of costume and coiffure. There is little that is more interesting and suggestive to many people than to walk through a gallery of portraits and note the successive changes in dress and adornment which they make evident, and which have been preserved for us by the painters of the portraits. Yet there is a more penetrating view freely open to the careful student, which is, that the chronicles of national history may frequently be clarified, if not interpreted, by means of a faithful portrait. Thomas Carlyle knew this with a seer's insight, and set it forth in his notable letter to David Laing, on a National Portrait Gallery for Edinburgh, in which he says: "In all historical investigations it is one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage enquired after. Often have I found a portrait superior in real instruction to half a dozen written biographies. The portrait was a lighted candle by which they could for the first time be read, and human interpretation made of them".

The above claims may be reinforced by a yet closer study. There is a veritable network of nerves beneath the surface of the human face, upon which thought plays as upon a harp of a thousand strings. These nerves agitate the cells of the muscles of expression. Upon these, as upon the harp, the fingers of one's avocations and contacts are constantly playing. And the music is no formless echo, but each pulsing note is modelling the features or inscribing a record with the impress of the individuality upon a facial disk. This needs no "Edison" to reproduce, for it is noted not so much by the ear as by the eye of anyone who bids him the time of day. Walter Pater recognized this fact when he said of da Vinci's *La Gioconda*: "All the thoughts and expressions of the world have etched and moulded there, in which they have power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the Middle Age, with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the pagan world, the sins of the Borgias". This record, traced in the lineaments of Mona Lisa, as painted by da Vinci, has given the portrait its fame.

There is also a realm of symbolism in portraiture, which some painters cultivate with distinction. Yet symbolism fails entirely when it ignores identity; for character is a fact of the spirit, which the countenance and frame reveal. For the purpose of pictorial art, the countenance and the frame supply the only symbols of the inner life; they, therefore, demand a supremely penetrating and reverent consideration and treatment. That critic has therefore sadly missed the truth who affects to smile at friends because they



claim to discern a personality that is readily appreciated in life, when this has been caught by the painter in unmistakable likeness. "There is an art that Nature makes that doth transcend art". Thank heaven for those of our painters who are able to see and have the skill to depict the personality, or, at least, have the courage to attempt depicting; for, only after identity is caught, can you reach and seize the spirit which is revealed in the identity.

Portrait practice has not always shown this high aim. A capable critic has called attention to the fact that many of the portraits which line the walls of Hampton Court and other English mansions are "insipid, vapid and meaningless". He might have spoken also of works in various mediums which do duty as portraits in this country, and have pointed to them as evidence that portrait painting is not of the highest order of art. But the very suggestion of such a thing convinces us that, on the contrary, there must be, for the purpose of rendering a true transcript of human features, a finer art. And such an art is a possession as special and pronounced in the true portrait painter as was the aptitude of Pascal for mathematics, or of Kepler for astronomy. As Pascal read divine truth and perfection in numbers, and as Kepler beheld eternal wisdom and power in mathematical calculi of the stellar universe, so the portraitist perceives evidences of intelligence, character and power that mark in the human a kinship with what we call the divine.

This is as it should be. The conscious greatness of the human being, his myriad-faceted nature, the testimony of the centuries already unearthed, and the forecasts of the years to come; his mind so limitless in compass, his soul on its high aspirations bent; all sustain the demand that portraiture shall leave the low plane on which it has been held, and take the honoured place prepared for it by many men whose names and works personify a matured art.

I have already declared that a man's history for a decade or a generation may be discerned in his face. I make bold to assert that the stamp of many generations is there, with all the social, political and moral revolutions and changes through which such generations have come; and that no portrait is complete until some, at least, of the fine play of those mutations has been caught. I have found clear traces at times in my own experience of Hindu, Mongol, Arab, Indian and many other racial strains, to no loss, but, on the contrary, to the distinct advantage of their possessors.

Small praise will come to a painter if, into the visible image of the person painted, he does not project more than a hint of the inner working of the mind, some radiation of the throbbing inner life, some purpose or passion of soul. Nay, failure to bring these

out will leave his art on a plane of mere mechanical likeness; whereas a full achievement means a proper, because positive, acknowledgment of pre-eminence in the vocation of the real portraitist.

Heroic processes and adventure develop courage and efficiency in all the arts, portraiture not less than any other. If portrait painting loiters among traditions of low aim, it becomes unworthy of the age and the craft. Conventions may have shackled weak spirits in the past, but the principles we are building into conventions to-day will be stepping-stones to higher development by daring spirits to-morrow. Progress is being made by orderly thought and high purpose in the builders who are placing another course, aye, indeed another storey, upon the never-to-be-finished Temple of Art.