

The New Portraiture:  
Portraits from Life, Portraits from Photographs

by  
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Accompanying the reemergence of traditional, representational painting that has taken place over the past twenty years has been a corresponding improvement in the general quality of painting. That improvement can be traced to several factors, among them simply the larger number of artists producing representational work and also to the springing up of small, atelier style workshops that have provided an alternative to the larger established art schools, many connected with universities, at which modernism still holds sway.

Curiously, the art of portraiture has witnessed trends working in quite the opposite direction. If we look at portraiture produced over the past fifty years, we see, in a general way, a falling off from that of preceding centuries. Never mind comparing the products of our present-day portrait painters with those of the great portraitists of the past----Van Dyke, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Lawrence, Sargent. One has only to glance at typical portraits hanging in corporate boardrooms, or in college libraries, or in legislative hallways, or in the living rooms of finer homes. There is little danger we will mistake any of them for a work by a master from earlier times.

One does not have to look far to find the main culprit in the decline in the quality of portrait painting over the past fifty years. It is the photograph. Ninety percent of the portraits being painted today have one thing in common: they are painted copies of photographs. Before 1950 few portraits were painted from photographs. The last half of the twentieth century saw tremendous improvements in photography---in color, in detail, in technique. And as the photographs got better, more and more portrait painters saw how much easier it was to copy a photograph than to capture the likeness of a live model. Today, it is unusual, indeed remarkable, to find a portrait being painted entirely from life; truly a great change in just fifty years. It is not hard to understand why, in the course of the past few decades, portrait painters have very

nearly completely abandoned painting from life in favor of copying from photographs.

The photograph makes it quick and easy for everyone involved. In the life versus photograph contest, all the incentives for all the parties involved are on the side of the photograph.

From the painter's standpoint, copying from a photograph is immensely easier and immensely faster than painting from life. The artist can retire to his studio with the selected photograph, and, with or without the use of mechanical/visual devices, produce the painting at his own pace. Nor does he have to travel to distant cities to spend several weeks away from home.

From the sitter's standpoint, the story is much the same. Subjects of portraits tend to be busier than most people. Politicians and corporate executives, doctors and college presidents, the famous and the accomplished, all have full schedules. Given the choice between a two-hour photo session and sitting three hours a day, five days a week, for three weeks or so, it is not hard to see why the photo session wins out every time.

From the portrait agent's viewpoint, the use of a photograph makes the task of arranging travel and living expenses between subject and painter easier. And the photograph makes it less likely that a dispute will arise over the likeness the painter achieves. A painting produced from a good photograph that is flattering to the client and which the client has seen is very likely to offer no surprises to the client.

Rather like grade inflation in schools and colleges, where higher grades make everyone involved---students and parents and teachers---happy, and where there is no constituency to oppose that inflation, so too does painting from photographs make everyone involved happy, with no one wanting to state the truth that great portraits are generally painted using a live model. So while everyone involved is pleased, the overall state of portraiture suffers.

Producing oil portraits from photographs has become the norm in spite of an overwhelming consensus that portraits painted from a live model are superior. Among the small number of portraitists who have resisted the temptations of photography are those in the top tier of their profession. That small group is adamant about the advantages of painting from life, as their comments attest:

Everett Raymond Kinstler, whom Tom Wolfe has described as “the John Singer Sargent of our times”: “I consider working from life and nature the highest priority.” And, “Painting from life offers the opportunity to study and observe what you are trying to interpret. It is the best way to develop an understanding and the character of your subject.”

Ronald Sherr, who is on anyone’s list of top portraitists: “It’s important to work from life. A single line from life is worth any number from a photograph. When working with someone over a number of days or weeks, I see them in moods and guises. The painting then becomes a synthesis of accumulated information, quite different from what a camera records in just a fraction of a second.”

Daniel Greene, who has probably taught more portrait painters than anyone else and who is a top portraitist himself: “The most important reason I paint from life is that painting from life requires a set of skills that includes special planning and strategizing that will result in realizing one’s intentions.”

Burton Silverman, who has been a top portraitist for nearly fifty years and the winner of the 2004 Gold Medal of the Portrait Society of America for lifetime achievement: “The main advantages in working from life are that human interaction provides a psychological balance so that one can add subjectivity to the objectivity of getting a likeness. . . . The camera has only one click while the human eye has many clicks for creating a complex image.”

David Leffel: “Painting from life offers the opportunity to study and observe what you are trying to interpret. It is the best way to develop an understanding and the character of your subject, whether portrait, figure, or landscape.” And, “While working from photos may be more convenient, you lose the verisimilitude you have from direct contact with the sitter.”

So while so many of the most respected portrait painters agree that portraits from life are always and in every way better than those copied from photographs and while it is difficult, if not impossible, to find anyone willing to defend the practice, the great majority—at least ninety percent--- of portraits today are produced from photographs.

There are a great number of reasons why painting a portrait using a live model generally produces a better picture. “Generally” because there are of course many poor portraits that have

been painted from life, just as there are some quite good portraits painted from photographs. But, generally speaking, the potential for achieving a truly great portrait is worlds better with a picture painted from life. Some of the reasons for this are technical in nature, having to do with light and form and edges, while other reasons have to do with the relationship established between the painter and the subject. .

An artist working from life can avail himself of all the advantages afforded by natural light. Very minor shifts in color are visible in natural light. It is the subtle color shifts that give richness and life to an oil painting. This is the case both in the illuminated parts of the painting as well as in the shadows. When working from life with natural light the shadows are not just dark areas, they are full of color. These most subtle color shifts and minor color variations are difficult, if not impossible, to capture on film.

With regard to form, a painter is much more likely to achieve a three dimensional look by using a three dimensional model than by copying a two dimensional photograph. It is the solidness and roundness of the head and figure in the painting that gives the subject a “real” quality.

The treatment of edges, where one object meets another in a painting, is still another area that offers the artist more opportunity in a painting that uses a live model. The relative sharpness or softness of edges matters a great deal. Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of the greatest of the English portraitists, commented on this aspect of painting in his “Discourse XI”: “. . . the true effect of representation consists very much in preserving the same proportion of sharpness and bluntness that is found in natural objects.”

In the same discourse, Reynolds touches on another aspect of portrait painting that is pertinent in comparing the results of painting from life versus painting from a photograph. It is an aspect that distinguishes great work from average work. This has to do with observing the “whole” and expressing the general effect rather than being concerned with the subordinate. Reynolds writes, “We are sure that it is expressing the general effect of the whole, which alone can give to objects their true and touching character; and wherever this is observed, whatever else may be neglected, we acknowledge the hand of a master.” So, all the properties of an object

that concern a painter, the outline, the color, and the light and shade, must be observed at large, and employed with the whole in mind. This can only come about by gazing on a live, three-dimensional object in natural light. The “lost” edges that cannot quite be made out in the shadows adds a quality of mystery to a painting and makes it more lifelike. A photograph tends to give explicit edges and this is transferred to the painted copy of the photograph. In the majority of portraits done from photographs there is no feeling for the “lost” in the painting.

Painting with a live model allows the painter to add a subjective element to the painting which is impossible in working from a photograph. A photograph is very objective, and there is little room for subjective interpretation on the part of the artist. In painting from life, the artist spends many, many hours with the subject and acquires a good feel for his character. That feeling becomes part of the portrait, in addition to the attempt at capturing the likeness. In painting from a photograph, there is just the attempt at likeness. That is, the product is judged mainly on how closely it resembles the photograph. The artist using a photograph has probably spent an hour or two with the subject taking pictures or, generally for show, sketching. The painter knows little or nothing of the character of the subject. He is stuck with simply trying to make his painting an exact replica of the photograph. As David Leffel has said, “The intent when using photography is generally convenience, production and a guaranteed image.”

Over the course of the sittings, the subject’s character become more and more clear to the painter, and that character becomes ever more clearly depicted in the portrait. Traits such as confidence or shyness, friendliness or aloofness are revealed as the painter comes to understand the subject. A photograph may display an expression that appears to be confidence or shyness, but the expression captured in the split second of the photograph may or may not be typical of the subject. A single photograph is quite likely to give a false reading. But the painter who relies on photographs is stuck with that single split second.

It is through this process of constant study and adjustment that the character of the subject emerges. The long process allows the painter, in the words of H. B. Wheatley in his Historical Portraits, to “gather into his portrait the various moods of the one man, showing him not as he looks at any particular time, but with all the possibilities of the face and with all the

inner man written on the outward form.”

The portrait painter who works from a photograph is judged---indeed he judges himself---on how exactly he can copy the photograph. Generally, the photo session that produces the single “reference photograph” involves taking dozens of photos, and generally, the subject chooses the most flattering photograph as the one to be copied. The most flattering photograph may or may not present a typical expression or mood of the subject.

Although copying portraits from photographs has become widespread, indeed the norm, there remains something of a stigma attached to the idea. The reluctance of artists to admit using photographs appeared as soon as they began experimenting with photographs in the last half of the nineteenth century. Many artists who are known to have used photographs went to great lengths to keep their working processes secret and to have destroyed the photographs as soon as the paintings were completed. Aaron Scharf, in his Art and Photography, discusses the problem of identifying those painters who did rely heavily on photographs: “Because of the stigma attached to artists who were known to rely on photography, its use was generally concealed so that many photographs obviously were afterwards destroyed. Consequently the pattern of such usage becomes much more difficult to trace”

Thomas Eakins, for example, was greatly interested in photography and used photos often in connection with his painting. But he remained always cautious about who witnessed his painting from photographs. As Eakins’s biographer Darrel Sewell has written, “Like most of his contemporaries, Eakins was discreet regarding the extent and methods of his use of photographic studies. . . . Eakins prudently concealed the evidence of his sources (the photographs).” Sewell goes on to recount the attempt of Eakins’s widow to follow suit. “The enduring controversy over artists’ use of photographs led Susan Eakins . . .to deny all but the most unavoidable instances of Eakins’s employment of such methods. . . .On the other hand, Eakins’s student and model John Laurie often spoke of Eakins’ using photos.” Such discretion undoubtedly flowed from the artist’s knowledge that using photographs would not produce as good a painting as using a live model.

The stigma attached to the use of photographs by a painter has never disappeared and is

very much alive today. This is especially evident in the attempts of most present-day portrait painters to downplay their reliance on photographs in their portrait work. The great majority of portraits painted today are copied from a single photograph. And that single photograph is all the portrait painter wants and needs. However, an elaborate process has developed whereby the portraitist attempts to make it appear that there are factors involved other than the copying of a single photograph. Thus, rather than a straightforward, “Mail me your favorite photograph and I will copy it,” a procedure has been developed which allows the portrait painter to appear to be more creative than copying requires. Generally, the painter will spend most of one day with the subject sitter, taking many photographs—usually a hundred or more. Then, the portraitist will probably spend a few hours sketching the subject. The sketching session is intended to assure the subject that he is working with an artist, not a copyist. While undoubtedly some painters use the sketches in their painting process, in the great majority of cases, the sketches are of little use. After the photographs are developed, the painter and subject together agree on which photograph to use for the portrait, and the painter takes the photograph to his studio and proceeds to copy it. That one photograph is invariably referred to as the “reference photograph,” the implication being that the painter will merely “refer” to the photograph for his painting. But it is extremely difficult to use more than one photograph, such as trying to use the eyes from one photo and the mouth from another. It just doesn’t work.

Once back in his studio, the painter has any number of copying methods available to him. The process can vary from simply tacking the photo to the easel and copying it---which takes considerable skill--- to projecting it on the canvas and tracing the image---which takes much less skill. A common practice is to project the slide image onto a screen set up next to the canvas. With the image on the screen, the painter can, if he wishes, use a grid system to insure that the proportions in the painting match perfectly those of the photograph. In the privacy of the studio, the temptation is great to use the fastest, easiest method available. At the extreme, he can avail himself of services advertised in art magazines to have photographs scanned onto canvas, usually for under \$50. All that is left then is to apply paint over the colored print on the canvas. The client, of course, has no way of knowing how much mechanical help the painter has used in the

process. Thus he has no idea of the extent of creativity and skill that have gone into the portrait. Was the portrait painted by an artist or by a copyist who has simply painted over an image scanned onto his canvas, or something in between? Only the painter knows.

While a painter working solely from a photograph, if he avails himself of all the shortcuts, can complete a portrait in less than twenty hours, he generally will tell the client that he can deliver the painting in several months as a way of assuring the client that he is hard at work for long hours. After a suitable length of time, the painting is delivered to the subject, usually by the painter, with brushes in hand, to make any final adjustments. But with a painting so completely finished, it is too late to make any but the most minor changes. This last step is intended to further assure the subject that he is dealing with an artist, not a copyist.

Aside from the negative effect that copying from a photograph has for any given portrait, there exist long range effects that are detrimental to the genre of portrait painting in general. The training of a good portrait painter is a long, tedious process, and nothing is more harmful to that training than employing photographs as shortcuts. Painting a portrait from a photograph taped up next to the canvas or from a slide projected on a screen is infinitely easier than trying to get a good likeness from a live model. The model moves, the model's expression changes, the model has to take breaks every twenty minutes or so. Painting from life is difficult, and the young artist who follows that tradition is in a hard school. But hard schools always produce better products than easy schools. Nearly all portrait painters instinctively know that painting from life is better for them in terms of improving themselves as artists. When drawing from a model, the artist has to look at the whole. When drawing one side of an arm, for example, he has to look at the other side as well. There may be a slight shift or movement by the model. Copying a photograph makes it difficult for the painter to see the whole. He becomes intent on copying each detail and forgets about the whole. Indeed, most young portrait painters begin with the expectation of painting from life, but the temptations offered by the photograph are so great that few stick to their resolve. Very quickly they succumb to the copying process, and each passing year of not painting from life makes it more and more difficult to do so. After a decade or so of relying on photographs, most painters are simply no longer able to paint from life without some help in the



way of photographs. In referring to his own development as a portraitist, Daniel Greene has said, "The main advantage of working from life for me personally is the ever present prospect of developing my skills of observation and execution." David Leffel adds, "Working from photographs while producing some fine pictorial representations does great disservice to the painter's development and spirit. . . This loss is detrimental to the painter's development. Being tied to a photograph is like a horse tethered to a rope, the horse can only travel as far as the tether allows. The painter is constrained by the inherent limitations of the photo."

Painting portraits from photographs is easier than painting from life for everyone concerned. But that ease is attended by considerable costs. The client loses because he ends up with a portrait that has inherent shortcomings. The painter loses because his development as an artist has been hindered through copying. Most important of all, the genre of portrait painting suffers because fewer and fewer painters are able to paint a portrait without resorting to copying.

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