



The art of portraiture

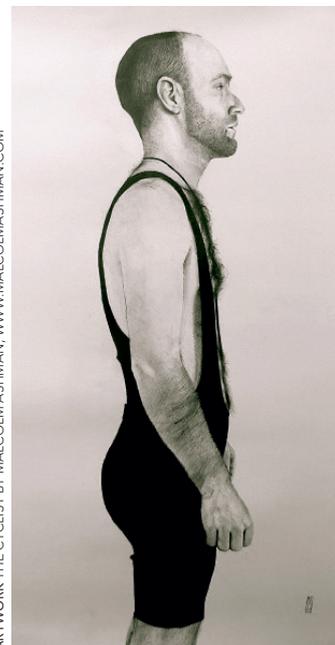
What's in a face?

We chat with some artists about why they love painting portraits, and look at what it takes to be a great portrait artist throughout history and today.

ARTWORK NICK BY GREG HARRIS, WWW.GREG-ARTIST.COM



ARTWORK THE CYCLIST BY MALCOLM ASHMAN, WWW.MALCOLMASHMAN.COM



Clockwise left to right: David's daughter in pastel; Greg uses offbeat colour harmonies; a cyclist in pencil by Malcolm; David painted scientist Sir Martin Evans during five sittings.

ARTWORK GIRL WITH WET HAIR BY DAVID COBLEY, WWW.DAVIDCOBLEY.COM



The desire to capture someone's likeness harks back to the ancient Egyptians and Romans. At the British Museum you can see 2,000-year-old 'mummy portraits' – faces painted on thin pieces of wood, attached to the mummies and bound into the cloth around the bodies, created as a memorial.

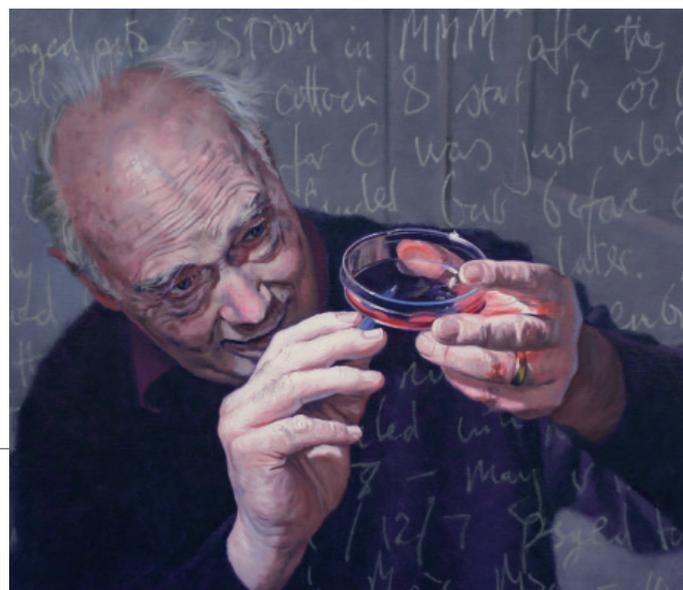
Today there's still that desire to capture someone's appearance, and their character too, and preserve them forever. Artists describe a real pull towards portrait painting, saying it's not easy, but a fascinating process.

"Even as a beginner, if you latch on to something that has something of a likeness, that's thrilling!" says Wiltshire-based Anthony Connolly, a winner of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Exhibition 2015. "When I paint someone I do

it over a period of days and it becomes a layered, rich object that is a record of time spent, not just one moment. When you look at a great portrait I think it resides with you."

Cat Croxford left banking to paint large portraits in bright colours and now runs workshops in Berkshire. She loves the analytical challenge of capturing

the person and says it's more than just "the sum of their features". She compares painting a portrait to solving a puzzle. "It's about who is this person, and what do I include or omit in order to find them on the canvas? Then the painting has its own life. A portrait can convey a likeness in terms of form, but can be storytelling and emotional too." ▶



ARTWORK SIR MARTIN EVANS BY DAVID COBLEY

PHOTO ANTHONY CONNOLLY PORTRAIT WORKSHOP



Expert advice

Keen to start painting a portrait? Try these top tips from our artists...

ANTHONY CONNOLLY

Whatever medium you're using, the undying skill is drawing – even people who paint directly are drawing with paint. You're placing marks in relationship to each other in a way that represents what you're trying to describe.

Don't worry about buying expensive materials. One time a man came to one of our workshops with a carrier bag holding half a dozen paints and some scrubby brushes. He put the canvas on the easel and he started to look... and he was fabulous!

CAT CROXFORD

A lot of people I teach are worried there's a classical way to paint a face. But it's okay to adopt any approach that you feel comfortable with – work from photos, use grids, as long as you've taken the time to really observe that face. Look and see what intrigues you, what makes your subject an individual.

Don't fuss over the details. Start as loose as possible or you'll go insane and never to do a portrait again! You don't paint every brick in a building... so concentrate on the overall impression.

GREG HARRIS

Don't make any of it up. Really look. Where does that contour go? How does it go from A to B? How are you going to describe that surface plane? Be patient – you will need to go through 50 painstakingly created pieces before you produce an okay portrait!

Make sure you place marks in the correct order from background to foreground. For example, the whites of the eyes have been painted before the eyelids – and not vice versa or it will look like the whites are floating on top of the face!

MALCOLM ASHMAN

Study portraits whenever you can in museums and galleries. The National Portrait Gallery has an extensive collection.

Photographic reference can be useful if your sitter isn't available but try to work from life whenever you get the chance.



ARTWORK MISS ROOT BY GREG HARRIS

For other painters, it's about the total absorption that you get with creating a work of art. "The whole process draws you in and time vanishes," says artist and tutor Tim Hall, who runs painting courses in Cornwall. "For me it's the best way to become completely focused. This was proven when I noticed a burgundy, rhomboid shape appear between the eyebrows of one of my models – at exactly the same time she was worrying about her mother."

Bristol-based artist Greg Harris, who is exhibiting at The Other Art Fair, finds it a personal process where you put yourself on the line too. "I feel it's worth investing more of myself when I'm depicting a person," he says. "Perhaps it's the fact that the sitter can give me direct feedback to the image I create, so the tightrope of getting it right or wrong is more exciting."

For the late master figurative artist Lucian Freud, known for his stark, fleshy lovers, friends and family painted in thick, impasto oils it was about the human condition: "I've always wanted to create drama in my pictures, which is why I paint people," he once said. "It's people who have brought drama to pictures from the beginning. The simplest human gestures tell stories."

So what does it take to be a great portrait artist? To capture someone's essence, as well as their likeness, artists look at many factors such as the setting, the person's clothes, their pose, props that relate to their life, and lighting. The artist's personal interpretation comes into it of course, and sometimes their relationship with the sitter. Whatever their style, many of today's artists are inspired by classic portraiture.



ARTWORK HENRIETTA AND OLLIE BY TIM HALL, CORNWALL PAINTING HOLIDAYS.CO.UK



ARTWORK ANOTHER ME BY CAT CROXFORD, WWW.CATCROXFORD.COM, WWW.JOEDAIKY.CO.UK



ARTWORK I'MR CASEY BY MALCOLM ASHMAN



ARTWORK SIMON BY DAVID COBLEY

The artist has many factors to consider in creating a portrait, including the choice of medium, pose, props, lighting and setting.

“Back in the Renaissance it was only those wealthy enough to pay for the materials and a commission who had their portraits painted.”

“It’s still Velázquez, Rembrandt and John Singer Sargent I look to most,” says David Cobley, founder of Bath Artists’ Studios and a winner of the 2015 Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Exhibition. “Before cameras you had to do it through years of practice, and rely on the skill of your hand and eye alone!”

Back in the Renaissance, it was only those wealthy enough

to pay for the materials and a commission who had their portraits painted. Leonardo da Vinci’s mysterious *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503) was thought to have been commissioned by her husband, a silk and cloth merchant.

In those days, flattery was an essential skill for court painters – during the Baroque period the Dutch painter Anthony van Dyck found himself in the court of King Charles I, whitening the women’s teeth and dressing them in their finest outfits, while in Spain, Velázquez painted more than 40 portraits of King Philip IV.

What draws artists to these old masters? “When I look at *Philip IV* by Velázquez I feel that time has been held there for me to visit it, hundreds of years later,” explains Anthony. “It’s that proximity to that experience that you get with painting. That’s exciting!”

As an interest in ordinary people and humanist values

emerged in the 17th century, Johannes Vermeer was drawn to painting people in their homes, such as *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* (c.1665), while Rembrandt painted his famous portraits – as well as nearly 100 self-portraits.

For Malcolm Ashman, a member of the Royal West of England Academy, Rembrandt’s commitment to his self-portraits is unequalled and would have given him tremendous “visual self knowledge”. “It must have given him great insight into the humanity of his sitters – for me, this shines out,” he says.

Can self-portraits such as Rembrandt’s help you perfect your skills for painting a

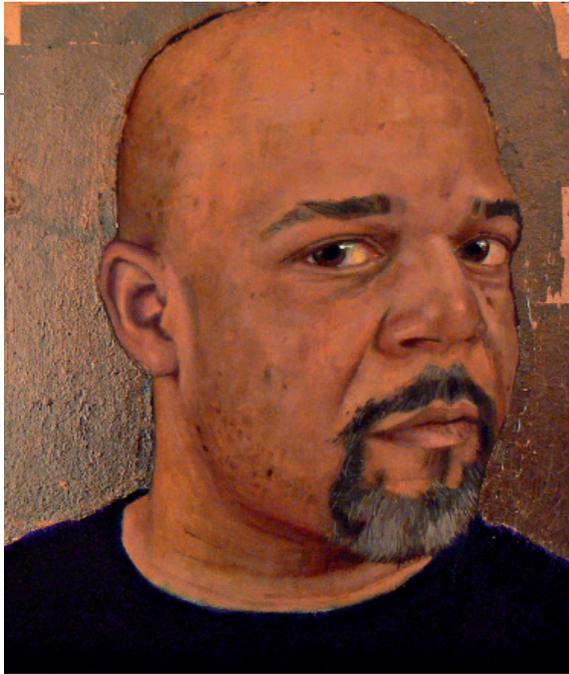
portrait of others? Many artists feel they can. “The advantage is that your model is always available,” says Malcolm. “And this easy access to the figure gives ample opportunity for experimentation. We see our own faces on a daily basis, and I think studying oneself helps when looking at others.”

The self-portrait is also a fascinating record of the artists themselves, as well as their talent – Van Gogh painted 36 self-portraits in 10 years, showing his fragile state of mind with restless brushstrokes, while Frida Kahlo expressed her sorrows through startling, surreal self portraits.

Over the 19th and early 20th centuries, abstract styles ▶



ARTWORK ALMA BY ANTHONY CONNOLLY, WWW.ANTHONYCONNOLLY.CO.UK



ARTWORK JAMES LAMBETH BY MALCOLM AHSMAN



ARTWORK BRIS STRAUM BY GREG HARRIS



ARTWORK KEITH, MECHANIC, 1998. BY JULIAN OPIE



ARTWORK LEE CHEF BY DAVID COBLEY

Clockwise L-R: artists use a range of media: vinyl on wood (Opie); oil and metal leaf on panel (Malcolm); oil on canvas (Greg); acrylic (Cat); oil on panel (Malcolm)

emerged and portraiture burst from one art movement to another, challenging the established art world, through impressionism to expressionism and surrealism and onwards. Subjects became anyone an artist was moved to paint – from friends and lovers to strangers – reflecting the world at that time through their eyes.

John Singer Sargent was commissioned to paint elegant portraits of eminent figures through the 1890s and early 1900s. Henri Matisse painted in vibrant colours that got him and his friends dubbed the wild beasts ('les fauves'), while Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque co-founded the fractured

style of cubism (see Picasso's *Weeping Woman* in 1937 after the bombing of Guernica) and started using collage. The growth of photography through the 19th and 20th centuries and the availability of cheaper cameras inevitably challenged traditional portraits, but painters used it to their advantage. In the 50s and 60s artists turned to what was around them – advertising, packaging, comic books and Hollywood – and pop art portraits from artists such as Warhol, Hockney and Lichtenstein exploded onto walls. Fascinated by celebrity and fashion, Warhol used photos from magazines and newspapers to create his iconic paintings of

“Fascinated by celebrity and fashion, Warhol used photos from magazines to create his iconic paintings of Marilyn Monroe.”

Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, then mass produced them using silkscreen printing.

So who are today's great portrait artists? Since the 1990s, new media has brought new ways for artists to showcase people and the world around them.

Gillian Wearing, winner of the Turner Prize in 1997, uses video, sound and photography to share the confessions of ordinary people. In one piece she asks people to write a sign and then photographs them with it; a policeman, revealingly, holds up a card reading 'Help!'.

Julian Opie, influenced by classical portraiture of the 16th to 18th centuries, 'paints' portraits using a variety of media and technologies. His style is inspired by billboards, with portraits reduced to black outlines and areas of flat colour. Says Opie of his piece *Keith. Mechanic*.

1998: "Everybody seemed to be a great model and seemed to offer up an individual and a type at the same time. I felt I was making a personal logo for each person I drew... I found that the slight differences of each drawing came close to evoking the person themselves despite the limited vocabulary."

Tracy Emin's notorious installation *My Bed* (exhibited



ARTWORK REVERIE BY MALCOLM AHSMAN



ARTWORK BY CAT CROXFORD

at The Tate in 1999 and sold for £2.5 million in 2014), complete with empty bottles and crumpled sheets, could be seen as a 'self-portrait' of her distress after a relationship breakdown when she stayed in bed for days.

And yet the painted portrait retains an ability to astound and move us. Figurative painters continue to depict people we've never met – but who we could know, they seem so universal. One of the most acclaimed artists of this generation, Daphne Todd, won the BP Portrait Award in 2010 with her amazingly lifelike portrait of her mother on her deathbed, while Thomas Ganter, a winner in 2013, depicts Karel, a homeless man.

Whether traditional or contemporary art appeals to you, the different styles are as varied as they are exciting: there's Jenny Saville's huge nudes; Frank Auerbach's craggy impasto

faces; Luc Tuymans's pared-down, cropped portraits; Gerhard Richter's portraits copied from photos; Chuck Close's shimmering computer-aided works; or David Hockney's 77 colourful portraits of his friends and family painted over the last two years (including the woman from his famous 1970 piece *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*).

And now, it's your turn! Tutor Cat firmly believes everyone can paint a portrait. "It's not a magic ability you're born with. Just keep sketching, keep looking, keep painting," she enthuses. "Paint from your belly, not your head, and your painting will have expression and integrity. And don't be too scared. Don't let yourself think portraits are hard. No one is judging that final portrait except you. Don't paint a portrait for anyone else but you." *By Vicky Guerrero*



PHOTO TIM HALL PORTRAIT WORKSHOP

Want to see more?
If you'd like to get close to some amazing portraits, check our listings...

BP Portrait Award 2016

National Portrait Gallery, 23 June – 4 September, www.npg.org.uk

William Eggleston Portraits

National Portrait Gallery (Porter Gallery), 21 July – 23 October, www.npg.org.uk

Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize 2016

National Portrait Gallery (Porter Gallery), 17 November 2016 – 26 February 2017, www.npg.org.uk

David Hockney RA: 82 Portraits And 1 Still Life

Royal Academy Of Arts (Sackler Wing), 2 July – 2 October, www.royalacademy.org.uk

The Other Art Fair

Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, 22–24 July, www.theotherartfair.com

Rembrandt: Self Portrait At The Age Of 63

Bristol Museum, until 17 July, www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-museum-and-art-gallery

Facing the World: Self-Portraits from Rembrandt to Ai Weiwei

Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 16 July – 16 October, www.nationalgalleries.org

A Handful of Dust, 18th-century British portraits in pastel, at the Holburne, Bath, until 6 November, www.holburne.org

Turning to See: From Van Dyck to Lucian Freud, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, until 4 September. www.bmag.org.uk

People's Portraits, on loan from the Royal Society of Portrait Painters (www.therp.co.uk), housed at Girton College, University of Cambridge, www.girton.cam.ac.uk

Portraits exhibition at the Whitworth, University of Manchester, until 23 October, www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk