When Paul Delaroche, the celebrated painter of melodramatic scenes and gorgeous velvets, was shown one of the first of Daguerre’s photographs he is said to have exclaimed “This is the death of painting”. He was wrong. It was only the death of his kind of painting. But though the art of painting has proved to die hard, painters die much more easily when deprived of their principal livelihood—and here Delaroche’s gloomy forecast seemed only too justified. Portrait painting as a lucrative source of income has indeed been almost superseded by photography, and no amount of critical argument is likely to influence the verdict of the public, which has accepted photography as the safe and practical means of conveying and preserving a person’s “likeness”.

The claims of photography are indeed too obvious and too formidable to need detailed discussion. Though we are all familiar with ludicrous failures on the part of the camera, we also know that the danger of such failures can be greatly reduced by producing a great number of snapshots in the hope that among them there will be one, at least, which fulfills our requirements and strikes us as a characteristic likeness. Since the further mechanisation of photography through the invention of the miniature camera, “photomatons” and similar...
devices, selection has tended more and more to become the last act, and this "statistical" approach of modern snapshots has some undeniable advantages—like many aspects of mechanisation which beset modern life it reduces the chances of total failure to very near zero. But what of the chances of total success?

The painter who was commissioned to paint the portrait of a Florentine beauty or of an Amsterdam alderman obviously could not rely on the law of great numbers. What he was to produce was to sum up the person once and for all. It was the form in which the sitter desired his or her appearance to be preserved for future generations. He could leave nothing to chance. With him the act of selection—of the proper posture, setting and lightening—had to come first before he set out on the laborious and expensive process of sketching, grounding, painting, and varnishing. His choice, then, was final, and therefore it required an act of concentration which in itself contains a promise of total success such as it is denied to the mechanical process.

Of course we must not expect of the great portrait of the past what the artists, by nature of their commission, could not give—the intimacy of the felicitous snapshot. It was only on the rare occasions when the artist did not paint for money but for fun—when he painted his intimates, some model picked up at a street corner or, best of all, himself—that he was free to disregard the susceptibilities of his Majesty the Sitter who paid his shilling and had his choice. These informal masterpieces show us, by way of contrast, the enormous influence which the sitter's demands and requirements used to have on the form and appearance of most of the portraits of the past. They remind us of the truth that any portrait is the outcome of the collision of two living personalities, that of the artist and that of the sitter, and it was the sitter who determined what might be called the social aspect of portraiture.

Better than by long-winded definitions can this aspect be exemplified through the illustrated diary of the eighteenth-century engraver Daniel Chodowiecki, who made a tour to Danzig in 1773. On one of its pages (fig. 1) the artist gave a humorous record of his session with the Primate of Poland, Archbishop Count Potocki, who posed for him in full panoply of state during an audience, his housekeeper, Mme. Oehmchen, watching over the artist's doings. We can well picture the official portrait engraving which was the result of the artist's labours; the archbishop as the bearer of the high office, cast in the mould of his social dignity. On another page (fig. 2) Chodowiecki confided to his diary how the dignitary appeared to him one morning when he was admitted to his presence to submit the final product—an old short-sighted man in nightcap and nightcap—no hero to his valet nor to the painter's discerning eye.

Perhaps there is no portrait of the past which might not have served Carlyle's searching Professor Teufelsdroekh as a text for a sermon on his "Philosophy of Clothes". Nor is the social aspect of portraiture confined to dress and clothes proper. We all know how much people tend to model their outward appearance, their bearing and deportment, and even their features to the pattern and dictates of fashion. There is more than a kernel of truth in the anecdote about Boucher, who tried to flatter Mme. Pompadour by telling her that he could never succeed in expressing the beauty of her colours. "That is odd"—she is reported to have replied—"since we both buy them from the same firm."

In passing review the portraits of the past one cannot but see how many artists conformed to the demands of fashion and pandered to its tyrannical whims by making their sitters even more like the average fashion dummy than the tailor and beauty culturist may have succeeded in making them. Even great painters have not always resisted the prize set on this convenient type of flattery—a splendid career as painters of "society". Though their work may have lost in artistic sincerity, they somehow made up for it through the brilliance and ease with
which they distilled the social aspirations of an age and class into figures of matchless elegance. In this social sphere art definitely scores over the camera, for the photographer's attempts at "touching up" reality end more often than not in pathetic failure. In fact, the strict patterns of aristocratic decorum which successfully dominated the art of portrait painting from Titian to Lawrence proved a baleful legacy to photography—we can all study its incongruous effects in the shop windows of suburban photographers, which show Miss Smith and Mr. Jones in the traditional postures of Venetian ladies and Van Dyckian cavaliers.

While thus the tradition of painted portraits proved harmful to photography, the camera at its best had a stimulating and invigorating effect on the painters' approach to their sitters. It helped them to discard those very conventions of "decorum" at the time when these ideas had loosened their grip on the sitters.

We can watch this process in the case of Ingres' famous M. Bertin. A sketch for the portrait of the great Press magnate (fig. 3) still adheres to the formula of gentlemanly ease, but in the end the master discarded this cliché and painted him (fig. 4) as no one would have dared to paint a sitter before the Great Revolution—sitting broadly and stolidly on his chair, both hands on his knees—a challenge to the social ideas of the past, but not without a human dignity of his own; the journalist champion of the rising bourgeoisie.

Here we have reached the border-line which divides the sphere of the sitter from that of the artist—the social aspect from the strictly artistic or aesthetic sphere. For we may assume that it was the artist who chose the unconventional form to bring out more of M. Bertin's personality, something of his "inner self". This, at any rate, is the ever-present ambition of the great portrait painter which nobody has expressed more succinctly than Cardinal Bembo, who reported in a letter to a friend that "the portrait which our Raffaello made of Tebaldeo is such an amazing likeness that it is even more like him than he is himself".

The means which the artist has at his disposal to perform this somewhat paradoxical miracle, to which the camera can never aspire, are the means of all art—simplification and emphasis. Their power to reveal the hidden qualities of the human countenance beyond the attainment of a photographic likeness can best be studied in the magnifying glass of caricature. For caricature may be described as "all-in portraiture". The caricaturist is unhampered by the bogey of "decorum". He need pay no heed to the tender feelings of his sitter. He is not bound by the codes of naturalism. He uses the features of his victims as mere raw material which helps him to express what he thinks of the fellow. With a few strokes he can show him up as an unsuccessful dandy or a blistering bully, with a trick he converts the climbing politician into a sheepish schoolboy, and the captain of industry into a slick villain.
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But though an analysis of the caricaturist’s methods may help us to appreciate something of the power of art to bring out and to reveal a person’s “inner self”, by manipulating its likeness, we must never lose sight of the fact that for all its points of contact serious portraiture proceeds on an entirely different plane. For, after all, caricature is a graphic joke. The caricaturist’s efforts are directed at summing up a person in a clever and convenient formula which may “stick” like a fitting nickname. A real portrait aims at something very different. It has to bring out the very complexity and depth of a personality, and if we look at the great masterpieces of that art we must admit that such a task, however gigantic, is not beyond the reach of the real artist. Many of the means by which he strives towards this goal may well defy analysis. Yet, there is one aspect of his work which shows art taking advantage of its very inability to emulate the completeness of the photographic record. It is precisely this inability which has led the artist to rely to a greater degree on our, the spectator’s, imagination to build up, in our minds, the complex picture he has mapped out for us.

There is a hint of these fascinating possibilities in Sir Joshua Reynolds’ memorable discourse in which, as head of the Academy, he paid the last tribute to the art of his great rival Gainsborough. We find Reynolds praising the admirable lightness of touch to be found in Gainsborough’s brushwork and the remarkable lack of detail and finish in his portraits. At first the passage appears to be little more than a backhanded compliment: “I have often imagined that this unfinished manner contributed even to that striking resemblance for which his portraits are so remarkable. Though this opinion may be considered as fanciful, yet, I think, a plausible reason may be given why such a mode of painting should have such an effect.” And here Reynolds proceeded to give, in a few bold outlines, what may be called the first psychological theory of portrait painting. “It is presupposed that in this undetermined manner there is the general effect: enough to remind the spectator of the original: the imagination supplies the rest—and perhaps more satisfactorily to himself than the artist with all his care could possibly have done."

Here Reynolds implies that the secret of Gainsborough’s success lay to some extent in an artistic trick—the trick of stimulating the spectator’s imagination by vaguely conjuring up the image of the sitter without ever contradicting his fleeting vision by confronting it with a brutal photographic fait accompli. We are reminded of a type of postcards on the market during the first year of the war which showed a crude and schematic likeness of a soldier’s, sailor’s, or airman’s head with a nondescript smile, in the form of a photographic negative, white on black. Buyers were advised to use these products as a kind of love magic. After staring at these black medallions for a number of minutes they should close their eyes, and the picture of their absent
INGRES. Portrait of W. Berhin
sweetheart, friend, or son would present itself with astonishing vivacity before the eyes of their mind. The principle on which these standard utility portraits were based is simple enough. The psychologist might describe them as an aid to projection. The positive image that the retina retained through the impression of the contrasting black and white patches merges with the memories of the real person in much the same way as the picture of a face may be projected into a cloud, or the monotonous rattling of a train may conjure up a long-forgotten melody.

Something like this—if we take it with a grain of salt—is the trick to which Reynolds attributed the "striking resemblance" of Gainsborough's portraits, and the subsequent passage shows that his views were not altogether free from malice: "It must be acknowledged that there is one evil attending this mode: that if the portrait were seen, previous to any knowledge of the original, different persons would form different ideas, and all would be disappointed at not finding the original correspond with their own conception, under the great latitude which indistinctness gives to the imagination to assume almost what character or form it pleases".

Here we come up against a serious handicap which threatens to stultify the discussion of all portraits of the past. In a way we shall never know more than half of the story. We can no more pronounce on the "resemblance" of Gainsborough's portraits than we can tell whether we would recognise Mona Lisa in the streets of Florence. But a glance at one of Gainsborough's masterpieces (fig. 5) may yet help us both to appreciate and to amend the wording of Reynolds' analysis. It is, no doubt, true that the light brushwork leaves many important features undetermined. The shape of the cheeks, the contour of the nose is indicated in slightly blurred outlines which leave a certain latitude to our imagination. What is more: the points which are most decisive for the expression of the face—the corners of the mouth and of the eyes—are, to some extent, left undetermined. We all know how crucial these points are for the character of a face—a mere shade can change a gay smile into musing melancholy. The result is, that we can indeed read into the beautiful face of Gainsborough's sitter something of a smile and something like an undisclosed sadness. By leaving certain traits purposely ambiguous Gainsborough contrived to keep his sitter's expression in a state of infinitely delicate poise. But the picture hardly bears out Reynolds' criticism that "this indistinctness gives to the imagination to assume almost what character or form it pleases". Rather does it leave the imagination oscillating, as it were, between various ways of reading the sitter's features: all of which, we feel, must have been characteristic of her, revealing another facet of her "real self".

Here the possibilities of art clearly outstrip those of the photographic lens, even the luckiest "hit" of which can only perpetuate one single transient moment out of that infinity of phases that together make up the pattern of living expression. By that very act of concentration that assists the birth of all true works of art the painter can triumph over the flux of time, and condense into one single aspect a variety of potential moments in the sitter's life. Perhaps this is one of the means by which the consummate artist performs his magic. For is it not magic that, by spreading various types of coloured clay on a piece of rough canvas, he conjures up the image of a human being that will live on in the richness of its emotional texture when the sitter and his vanities have long been forgotten?
5 GAINSBOROUGH, Perdita

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