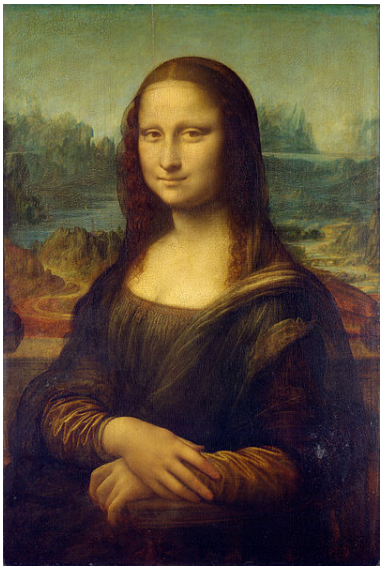
Shoshannah Brombacher PhD talks about:

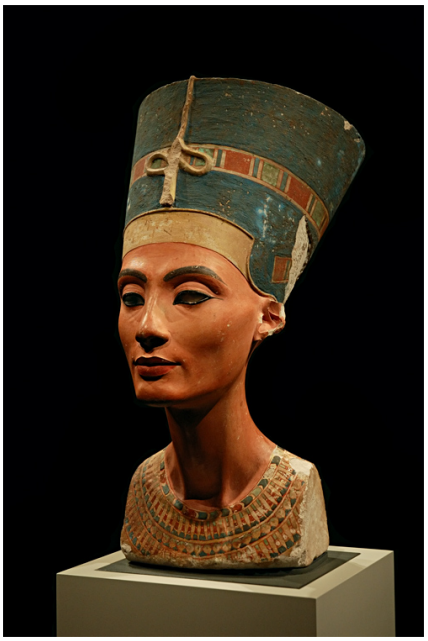
PORTRAITS - WHAT'S IN A FACE? (1)



People are fascinated by portraits of both the living and those long gone. Portraits make it possible to stand eye to eye and face to face with people who are dead, absent, unreachable or unapproachable. Thanks to portraitists we know how historical personalities looked, and sometimes we can deduct their character or behavior from certain details in their portraits. We encounter historical but anonymous portraits as well. We don't know their names. Some belong to people who posed for portraits of mythical or biblical characters (think of the numerous renderings of Moses or Abraham with German, Dutch, British or Italian features). Some figured in mythological and other scenes, but these are technically spoken no portraits.

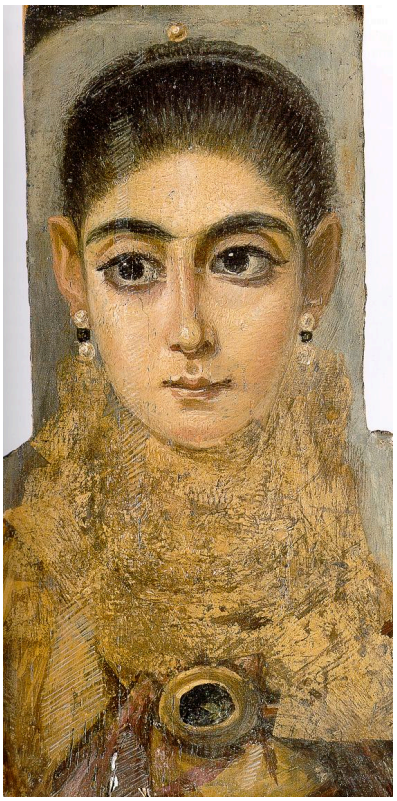
A portrait has individual features and is often—albeit not always — connected to a name, like the famous "Mona Lisa" in the Louvre in Paris, who was probably the wife of Francesco del Giocondo.

The Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, Nobel prize winner of Literature in 2006, wrote a novel based on he impact which the first real life-like portrait had on a group of miniaturists in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the sixteenth century. Artists at that time painted people in miniatures with generic, non individual faces (*illustration left)*. Seeing the realistic features of

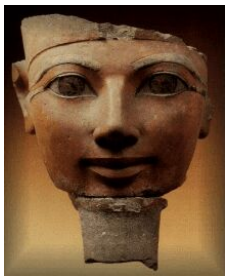


their sultan on paper caused tremendous surprise and complete shock (*right*, it was a portrait similar to this one). Realistic portraits had been tabu hitherto in Ottoman society. For us, coming from a modern Western society which has been inundated for ages with all kind of hyper realistic portraits and later on with even more hyper realistic photography, one is surprised by this fact and needs both empathy and a good imagination to understand their reaction. But although the effect which a portrait has on us, people of the twenty-first century, has been watered down, a good painting still evokes a lot of emotions.

Portraits have been around for a long time. People had portraits made of their loved ones, of themselves, their kings and rulers, and other significant persons for millennia. Our museums are filled with ancient Egyptian statues of Pharaohs and their dignitaries (like the famous statue of chancellor Nakht, and the bust of Nefertete), with life-like faces painted in wax on mummy masks from the Fayum in Egypt, the bearded metal helmet-mask of the Akkadian usurper Sargon II, the famous golden Greek mask of Agamemnon, and medieval miniatures, statues, paintings and even stained glass windows of Kings, Emperors and Sultans.

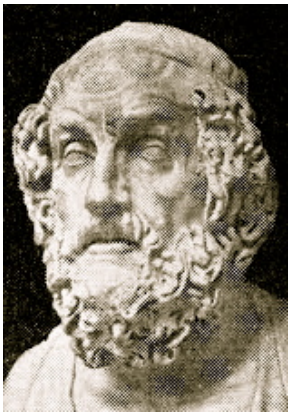


The earliest portraitists were often heavily restricted by local style, ritual and convention. Their portraits looked pretty uniform, not showing individual features, like the face of the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut, adorned with the traditional male (!) Pharaonic beard.



There were exceptions already in Antiquity. For instance, Roman busts and coins which are based on the bearer's actual physiognomy.

Then there is a category of famous portraits which are actually not based on the real physiognomy of its bearers. The engraving of the medieval philosopher Maimonides jumps to mind. Everybody "recognizes" Maimonides and it looks very life-like, not like a generic face in e.g. a miniature, it has been copied many times and included in books about his life, but it was an artistic rendering made a few centuries after he passed away. How he really looked we do not know. The same is true for the blind Greek poet Homer, whose actual face is unknown, but everybody knows his bust. Many other famous people got a face after their death that has nothing to do with their features, like the portrait of Charlemagne.



In Western European art, the Renaissance introduced individual portraits which not only show a person's physiognomy, but also reveal his or her character traits, moods, and well resembling or real or perceived public image. A good example is the Italian portrait of an "Old Man and a Young Boy" by Domenico Ghirlandaio, a grandfather lovingly engaged in conversation with his grandchild. Compare this to the eighteenth century image the Emperor Napoleon, a proud ruler on a horse: the difference in character between the two people is obvious from their posture.

The great Dutch painter Rembrandt reached a very high level with his portraits of his beloved Saskia, burghers of Amsterdam, and even Biblical personalities, which in reality were Sephardic Jews living near his studio in the Joodenbreestraat in Amsterdam. We recognize them from other portraits. The couple in Rembrandt's famous works "The Jewish Bride" has been identified by some as the contemporary poet Daniel Levi the Barrios and his wife. So, is this a portrait? Yes, and no, depending how you look at it. If the name of the portrayed person is known—as some assume it is—it is a portrait, if the names of those portrayed are not know, we recognize simply that the artists used a real person as a model for a symbolic painting of a bride, or love. What Rembrandt showed in most of his portraits is that a good portrait comes alive when it not only shows the features of the person, but also his or her character.

Painters often show important attributes related to the lives, surroundings or background or profession of their portrayed. That this is not always necessary when the portrait is already in a

specific place shows the vignette of a baker and his wife on a wall in their own house in the Roman City of Pompeii. People who knew them also knew their profession, so it was deemed unnecessary to portray them with symbols like a loaf of bread or an oven. But the couple shows their status and good education by holding a scroll (the baker Terentius Neo), and a wax-table (his wife) used for the administration of their shop.

Over the ages, the styles of portraits changed considerably. It is interesting to observe the long rows of portraits of deans of Leyden University (Holland), from its foundation in 1575 to our days, which have been covering the walls of a room in the main academic building for centuries. They are all the same size, but the background in the portraits, the posture and expression of the deans, and the technical painting style all vary, from the austere older academics against a dark background to the luscious bewigged half smiling, confident faces in eighteenth century, and the more casual depictions in course brush strokes of the twentieth century professors with their light or grey green backgrounds.

And what if a painter portrays people in considerably different styles, like Picasso did? Some people will argue that Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein probably resembles Stein better than his cubist portrait of Dora Maar resembles Maar. But that is in the eye of the beholder and mostly a matter of taste.

We learn from he popularity of certain paintings that a good portrait usually conforms the following standards:
Not only does it show the image and likeness of its subject, but it often lets the character of this person shine through in his or her posture, colors, attitude, angle, painting style and the way the eyes look at—or avoid—the spectator. Filling out the background is optional, and should be discussed with the commissioner of the work. It helps if the painter knows the person to be portrayed, be it in person or by getting a good description and/or photo if possible, with as much information as is available. It is, of course, not imperative that the portrayed person is still alive. This way, the artist gets the feeling that he or she 'knows' he person well enough to paint them. However, just copying a photo will result in exactly that: a copy of a photo, but not a portrait.

This is part 1 of an article about portraits. Part 2, about the portraits of the artist Shoshannah Brombacher, will follow soon.