

30 Photography and art theory

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Ideal beauty

'The photographer who understands his art has to hide all the defects and to show more pre-eminently what is beautiful and perfect', said Antoine Claudet, who, like all early nineteenth-century portrait photographers, accepted without question the need to idealize the sitter. Idealization in portraiture was a fundamental tenet of belief which influenced all aspects of their practice. Nobody entertained the slightest doubt that it was the portrait photographer's professional responsibility to highlight natural advantages and to conceal or obscure in shadow any mediocrity, imperfection or blemish.

This concept of idealization, however, was hardly congenial to a mechanical process invested with the power to reproduce accurately any subject presented to the lens. Why, then, were early photographers unanimous in their support of a theory so at odds with the inherent capability of their new medium? The answer to this apparent contradiction is not difficult to find. When practical photography was invented in 1839, the photograph itself may have been an innovation, but the portrait in other media boasted a long and distinguished pedigree, and a particular popularity in Britain. According to the influential art authority, John Burnet, writing in 1850, 'No branch of the fine arts has met with greater encouragement in England than portrait painting. Nor has portraiture flourished to the same extent in any other country'. It followed, therefore, that when photography emerged as a serious competitor to brush and palette, it came face to face with a mature, well-established body of ideas about the portrait and its purpose. Over the centuries painters had evolved a rhetoric about portraiture which was naturally tailored to fit the strengths and limitations of the hand-crafted product. It also matched the social aspirations of both artist and client. Photographers could not simply ignore precedent nor turn a blind eye to current practice. It is therefore important to examine the response of photographers to contemporary theories of portraiture and assess their influence on the character and content of the photographic portrait of the nineteenth century.

By the eighteenth century a hierarchy of the various branches of painting had been established. Within this hierarchy portraiture ranked lower than the 'historic' or grand style, which occupied the premier position. The grand style concentrated on scenes of heroic action or suffering drawn either from the scriptures, or from stories in Greek and Roman history and legend. The historic ranked highest among the various styles because it afforded the greatest scope for the depiction of the 'Ideal'. According to Sir Joshua Reynolds 'This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle, by which works

of genius are conducted'. To achieve the ideal of beauty, artists were required to undertake a careful and minute observation of the natural world in order to reproduce the perfection of nature on canvas. Their endeavours could, however, be considerably assisted and materially improved by close study of the extant works of the artists, and particularly the sculptors, of classical antiquity.

Antique statuary was, according to Burnet, the principal source from which the great artists founded their style on the revival of painting in the fifteenth century, and it remained their chief resource even into the nineteenth. The artists of antiquity, it was felt, had produced work of such outstanding excellence that it could serve as a model of ideal perfection. The miniature painter Archibald Robertson, writing an instructional letter to his youngest brother Andrew in 1799, advised him to 'Practise the study of sublime and *beautiful* nature. Study the Antique more than barely copy it – form an ideal beauty both male and female upon the ground of the Antique, and apply it in your practice of portraits, etc.'

This belief in the excellence of classical art was such that the training of painters in the nineteenth century included both drawing from life and from the antique, whereby, according to Burnet, 'the accidental varieties and defects of the living model are corrected by a reference to their refined proportions and form.' The young Andrew Robertson, reflecting on his subsequent admittance to life classes at the Royal Academy in 1802, congratulated himself on having 'stuck to my plan to form my taste from antique – then draw from life – for if we draw from a bad model, the taste is corrupt and takes much longer to unlearn what has been done ...'

The ideas that were considered appropriate for the grand style naturally influenced thinking in respect of the other, less exalted genres. Elements from the most prestigious, when introduced into other branches of painting, could be felt to elevate and enhance the lesser styles. Since the same artists who painted historical and religious subjects also painted portraits, the translation of ideas and practices from one style to the other was inevitable and a recognized source of creative stimulation. Thus, by clothing his female subjects in classical draperies and portraying them in mythological roles, Reynolds was both upgrading his own paintings and flattering his sitters.

By accepting the concept of ideal beauty as the ultimate goal in art, portrait painters were faced with an immediate and obvious difficulty. According to Reynolds: 'An History-painter paints man in general: A Portrait-Painter, a particular man, and consequently a defective model.' There was, then, a clear recognition of the discrepancy between achieving accurate likeness and the pursuit of an ideal beauty. The true artist, however, was left in no doubt as to the appropriate response to this dilemma. According to one influential critic, those who demanded real, striking, startling likeness would find it 'in the merest daub, in the harshest caricature, but will look for it in vain in the finest pictures.' So the portrait painter's role came to be defined as acquiring a knowledge of the ideal standard of beauty, recognizing where each individual sitter failed to measure up to this standard, and taking the appropriate action 'not by obliterating such departure [from the ideal], but by modifying it and thus ennobling the character by refining both on the form and the colour.' This explains Sir Thomas Lawrence's reported observation that even the majestic head of Mrs Siddons comprised parts and forms which did not appear to belong to the great actress, and these should therefore be omitted in her portrait.

Given that in portrait painting the pursuit of the ideal was translated into the idealization of the sitter, the camera's essential ability to reproduce factually accurate likeness could only be perceived as a disadvantage rather than a uniquely valuable asset. Within the context of such ideas, the mechanically produced portrait must automatically be viewed as an inferior version of the hand-painted product. So strong was the power of this convention, however, that no Victorian photographer attempted to challenge it. Early nineteenth-century portrait photographers concentrated their efforts instead on moulding their practical procedures in conformity with this alien and restrictive doctrine. And when the inconsistencies inevitably emerged, they directed their energies to devising lines of argument to defend the indefensible!