

Characterization in portraits

The portraitist of the period was concerned with more than the mere delineation and idealization of external features. The best portraits obeyed a more profound and significant imperative, to trace on canvas

'... not the form alone
And semblance, but however faintly shown
The mind's impression, too, on every face'

As part of their professional rhetoric painters proclaimed their ability to penetrate the very minds of their sitters, to fathom the deep recesses of character and to translate the very essence of their being onto canvas as a permanent record for posterity. Such a claim added a spiritual and moral dimension to the painters' work. It also proved of immense value in bolstering the professional mystique and social prestige of the artist painter.

The importance of this concept of the intuitive, omniscient artist was certainly not lost on the newcomers with cameras. They, too, rushed to embrace this self-enhancing credo without reservation. Photographers solemnly affirmed their belief that the true purpose of the portrait was, in Blanchard's words, to 'illuminate the face with the semblance of the divine light of the soul.' Indeed, for some photographers this represented the absolute apex of achievement, as demonstrated in *The Photographic News* of 3 November 1876:

To secure a portrait of a man in his completeness, mind and body, instead of a mere mask of his physical presentment, I consider the highest achievement in portraiture, the highest aim of the most skilful portrait painter, the crowning glory of a photographer.

For Julia Margaret Cameron, considered by some the most inspired photographic portraitist of the nineteenth century, portraiture was clearly regarded as an intimate act of communion between one soul and another: '... my whole soul has endeavoured to do its duty towards them [her sitters] in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.'

The representation of the mind and the power of portraying a sitter's innermost thoughts raised the portrait painter's work to the high ranks of the historical picture. In keeping with the traditions of the historic in painting, the qualities revealed in portraiture had to be such as would reflect well on the sitter, and elevate the mind of the viewer to higher

thoughts. The purpose of art was to inspire and ennoble; depiction of base qualities, likely to degrade the sitter and corrupt the viewer, had no place in art. This attitude provoked Jonathan Richardson's sardonic observation that 'If a devil were to have his portrait painted, he must be drawn as abstracted from his own evil, and stupidly good.' Thus the portrayal of the inner being was to be idealized in much the same way as the outer body, with defects concealed, virtues revealed. Certain qualities became conventional: grace, dignity, refinement, modesty, simplicity, chastity, and so on. Such ennobling qualities were echoed in the characteristics attributed to the statues of antiquity, qualities, therefore, which had withstood the test of time.

Indeed, grace and dignity were to be universally applied. Painters were even praised for the qualities they were thought to confer on their subjects: Titian, for noble dignity and unaffected simplicity; Vandyke, for refinement and good breeding; Reynolds, for unaffected ease and natural grace. These were the acknowledged masters of portraiture in painting whom photographers were frequently exhorted to study as sources for their own inspiration and improvement. Characterization was consistently stressed as an important element in photographic portraiture. Indeed, in the view of Cornelius Jabaz Hughes, whose shilling manual on *The Principles and Practice of Photography* saw fourteen editions between 1859 and 1886.

The primary object should be to produce a characteristic likeness, and the secondary one to render it as pleasing as possible by a judicious selection of the view of the face and pose of the figure, so as, without sacrificing character, to bring out the good points and conceal the less favourable ones.

However, in attempting to characterize their sitters, nineteenth-century photographers did not intend nor attempt any serious, analytical exploration of the individual psyche. They were not concerned to expose the often contradictory elements which make up individual character, such as we perceive it today in our post-Freudian society. Victorian photographers sought instead to stereotype by age and sex within the narrow range of qualities hallowed by their acceptance in painting: modesty, simplicity and chastity for women; dignity, strength and nobleness for men.

When describing the working methods of Antoine Samuel Adam-Salomon, A French sculptor turned photographer, whose entries in the International Exhibition in Paris in 1867 provoked the British press to rapturous admiration, the editor of *The Photographic News* of 31 January 1868 noted with approval his 'keen and rapid' perception of the characteristic traits of his sitters. 'On the young English girl he aimed at simplicity of effect; in the matron he sought more of graceful dignity. In a journalist ... he aimed at more severe dignity of style ...' In 1891 Henry Peach Robinson, acclaimed art photographer, influential author, proprietor of a high-class studio, and perhaps the leading figure in nineteenth-century British photography, advised fellow photographers to represent their sitters as 'moderately calm ladies and gentlemen; or, if they are not entitled to the courtesy title, then as decent men and women.' His words summed up the approach of mainstream commercial operators in the treatment of their sitters, regardless of whether individual characters were calm or decent or, indeed, aspired to the precise social rank which the title of lady or gentleman denoted in the nineteenth century.