

31 The anatomy of expression in painting

Charles Bell

Source: Bell, C. (1806) *Essays on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting*, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, pp.127–9.

The lowest class of the Dutch painters, and the caricature draughtsman, have chiefly to do with broad laughter. It is too ludicrous and too violent a straining of the features for other compositions. [...]

A smile has more variety of expression than laughter. It may convey a thousand different meanings. [...]

But there is an expression still more charming: a certain mobility of the features which indicates the susceptible mind of a lovely woman, and is more enchanting than the dimpled cheek; an evanescent illumination of the countenance which words cannot convey, and in the representation of which the painter has the superiority over the poet.

32 The photograph and artistic colouring

Alfred H. Wall

Source: Wall, A.H. (1861) 'The photograph', in *A Manual of Artistic Colouring, As Applied to Photographs: a practical guide to artists and photographers*, London: Thomas Piper, pp.16–18.

Expression. – Some of our greatest painters have demanded for one portrait as many as fifty sittings, not of course for general outlines or mere manipulatory details; but for the embodiment of an expression which should most forcibly depict the very soul as it were of their model. The accomplishment of this lofty aim is commonly held to be the great point of superiority which the painter claims over the photographer; but why? The painter must see the expression before he can catch it; and, if you secure for your camera that same expression, in less time than the draughtsman needs to impress it upon his memory or transfer it to his canvas, the art which can depict a cannon ball in motion will seize and render it permanently visible. Those photographers who are not satisfied with 'a mere map of the face' (as one of our old painters used to call an expressionless portrait), may and do frequently secure expressions as beautiful, and far more truthfully characteristic, than any I have seen in drawings and paintings. The great point is, either by the art of your conversation, or some similar means, to call into your sitter's face such an expression as may be most pleasing in the picture.

Now this is not done by solemnly impressing his or her mind with a nervous fear of moving – better spoil a dozen plates than do this; but by endeavouring to make your sitter feel perfectly at home and unrestrained by your presence. Nothing is more common than photographic portraits of uncomfortable looking ladies and gentlemen, upon whose faces we read at once a feeling of nervous apprehension, as if they were waiting the extraction of a tooth.

But these are not more objectionable than grinning likenesses. Should the sitter desire to smile while sitting, the smile should be a faint one; for, however beautiful it may be flitting like passing sunlight over the face, when it is seen fixed and unchangeable, it too frequently conveys the idea of a mere grin, or a piece of affectation.

If the light received by the head be too vertical, the eyes of your model become lost in the dense shadows cast by the brows, a black patch, too opaque and hard to deserve the name of shadow, falls under the nose, and the corners of the mouth are lost in deep masses of shade descending at an angle towards the jaw, and thus your portrait has a scowling or lugubrious expression, well calculated to offend and disgust the most amiable of sitters. This therefore must be avoided.

A very miserable expression will be obtained by placing the sitter in too strong a light, or by directing his eyes towards an object too brilliantly illuminated. That portion of your room into which you direct your model's eyes while photographing, therefore, should, undoubtedly, be dark; as you then not only render the act of sitting much less unpleasant, but improve the appearance of the eye itself by the consequent enlargement of the pupil.

The expression of the face should be carried out in the pose. Keeping or harmony is violated when, while the features express one feeling, the

position of the body only serves to weaken or destroy it. To quote from a little work of my own, — 'The eyes and mouth may express vigorously active and lively thought; but if the poor tame pose be one which has no agreement with such expression, the whole effect will be lost.'¹

Note

1 The 'Technology of Art,' published in the *Photographic News*.

33 The studio and what to do in it

H.P. Robinson

Source: Robinson, H.P. (1973 [1885]) *The Studio and What to Do in It*, New York: Arno Press, pp.94–5.

Have you ever noticed, when you are about to take a portrait, and are endeavouring to call up an animated expression on the countenance of your sitter, what a dogged determination he sometimes has, not to be beguiled out of the moody expression he has assumed? At last, when you have tried all the subtleties you know, you ask him, in desperation, if he has not got such a trifle as a smile with him. He immediately answers, with a charming expression you long to secure, 'Oh, no! when I smile in a photograph I always grin.' Here is another sample of a good model gone wrong through the stupidity of photographers. Many operators think that if they make their sitters smile – they don't care about the quality of the smile – they have done their duty in their own particular state of life, forgetting that many people look idiotic when their simpers and smiles are perpetuated. Others seem to think that all expression consists of gush, and wake up the features to an unnatural degree of intensity. The photographer should endeavour to represent his sitters as moderately calm ladies and gentlemen; or, if they are not entitled to the courtesy title, then as decent men and women.

Some faces are beautiful in repose, hideous in movement. A broad laugh is often beautiful in nature, because of its evanescence; it becomes intolerable when fixed on paper. But there is a look of animation, far short of a smile, which suits nearly all faces, and which is so permanently beautiful that it deserves to be printed in carbon or enamel.

John Gibson, the famous sculptor, considered a smile frivolous; but what would be undignified in sculpture may be proper to less severe modes of artistic expression. He says, in a letter to a friend: – 'The fault of the portraits of the present age is, that every man is expected to look pleasant in his pictures. The old masters represent men thinking, and women tranquil; the Greeks the same. Therefore, the past race of portraits in paint and in marble look more like a superior class of beings. How often have I heard the remark, "Oh! he looks so serious." But the expression that is meant to be permanent should be serious and calm.'

This is true enough of the expressions of men, but I cannot help feeling that the cheerful expressions of ladies and children are their best, especially when they are educes with such art as to appear perfectly natural; indeed, some of the most delightful portraits of children represent them in a very happy frame of mind.