Translation Messina

**The Portrait**

**Presentation of the Theme**

The origins of painting seem to lie in a primal scene, that of a man who recognises his own image as a shadow or reflection on a mirroring surface. The shadow is at the heart of the legendary tale recounted in Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* (XXXV, 151) of the daughter of a Corinthian potter, Butade Sicionio, who, at the moment of parting from her lover, “traced the outline of the shadow of his face cast on the wall by the light of a lantern; her father moulded clay on to this silhouette, thus reproducing the face”. While Alberti, in *Della Pittura* (1435-36), has recourse to the mythical figure of Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the fountain “in the same way painting is nothing else but embracing and seizing with art the surface (speculum) of the fountain”. In a more empirical fashion, Leonardo reminds us that “The first painting consisted simply of a line which bordered the shadow of a man cast by the sun on a wall” (*Trattato della pittura*, 126). It follows that the portrait would seem to be the primary genre of painting, as is confirmed by Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo in the *Trattato della Pittura* (1584): “The practice of portraying from life, that is, making images of men that resemble them so much that anyone who sees them is able to tell that they are the very persons depicted, I believe is so ancient a one that it was born at the same moment as the art of painting itself ”. An ontological statute of the portrait, as the quintessence of painting may be substantiated by the etymology of the term (v. *Ritratto* in the volume *Enciclopedia Universale dell’Arte*), from *traho* (draw lines) with its two derivations, *retraho* (*ritratto*, *retrato*) or *protraho* (*portrait*, *Porträt*), both with the underlying meaning of duplicate or copy. Central to the history of painting as mimesis, the portrait is of course recognized as such in Hegel’s *Aesthetik* (“All painting tends towards portraiture”), but even nowadays it is correlated to painting by philosophers like Jacques Derrida (*Mémoires d’aveugle, L’autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris, 2000), who confine the act of painting to the deployment of a glance and then to its diffractions or ulterior openings-out which are then restored to the page or to the canvas. In another direction, the interdisciplinary cast of recent art history has privileged the study of the portrait for the almost infinite taxonomic potential that is available and for the complex phenomenology that seems to offer unlimited areas of research. It is far from being a simple matter of (even psychological) verisimilitude (G. Simmel, *Die aesthetische Bedeutung der Gesicht*, 1901; B. Croce, *Ritratto e somiglianza*, 1907, in *Problemi di estetica*, Bari, 1923), the practices, the connotations, the displacements of the portrait seem to be retraceable only within the specifically historic contingencies of the appearance of the genre itself, in a context which brings into play the different tensions of its normative canons, of its visual rules and of the social expectations which motivate it and by which it is engendered. The portrait has always constituted a criterion, a definitive yardstick by which are measured not only the success of mimesis and the degree of lifelike depiction, but also of metalinguistic effects, as is confirmed by the development of deconstructive and multimedial portraiture on the part of twentieth-century avant-garde painting.

**Thematic sectors**

*1). The portrait and anthropology*

The function of the double. The Old Testament Book of Wisdom chapter XIV identifies the rise of idolatry as the moment when the portrait of a powerful governor is raised in his honour after his death. Vernant reminds us that the actual sense of the Greek verb *mimeisthai* is to imitate or to simulate the effective presence of an absence; the portrait is thus a substitute, the equivalent of the person her/himself, rather than simply a likeness. In the legend of Butade, the traced shadow already refers to a physical contact between the image and its referent so that the image actually incorporates something of that referent. There is a polarity between, on the one hand, the statement of an absence and the function of memory, both distinguishing features of the image, and, on the other, the physical creation of this image in the concrete presence of the object it is representing.

The archetype of the mask and its function towards ambiguity, between disguise and disclosure, establishing a close relationship between its wearer and the identity it represents as it aids the resurfacing of whatever has been forgotten or repressed and requiring from this wearer a transforming union with it. In the practice of the self-portrait, the adoption of the mask, a frequent feature from Symbolist art onwards, implies an awareness of being an image for other people and also, and especially, for oneself, not as an object of show, but rather in the sense of a dual identity which the self must assume.

The exorcism of death; the portrait and funerary rites. Alberti, at the beginning of Book II of *Della Pittura* writes: “Painting not only contains a divine force which, similar to the force of friendship, as they say, makes an absent person present, but even more so it makes the dead, even those who died centuries before, seem almost alive”. Death masks. The sacred meaning of the portrait, due to its origin in the icon; or its magic meaning, from Dedalus’s statue to the effigies of ancestors in the Roman atria recalled by Pliny, to the *Voti* in the Florentine church of the Annunziata studied by Warburg (1902), up to the literary topos of the portrait as murderer.

Guide text: Jean Claude Bailly, *L’apostrophe muette, Essais sur les portraits du Fayoum*, Paris, 1997.

2) *Theoretical statute of the portrait as* genre*; canons and codes*.

Renaissance and neoplatonic/academic ? treatises. The diminished validity of the portrait, challenged by a traditional neoplatonic suspicion of appearance.

The controversial status of the mirror. Respecting the rudimental technology of the mirror, if it became, for Leonardo, master painter, a guarantee of veracity, it had previously been identified by Alberti as a exemplar of artifice as it corrected the imperfections of nature.

The problem of similarity, in the antithesis between realistic individuality and the necessity for decorum, between exactitude of description and the dissimulation of defects, between individual and idealized type.

The polarity between physical resemblance and veracity. A portrait may be unlike due to the imposition or distortion of significant features, but these may constitute the authenticity of the subject’s social and/or historical role.

The real test of resemblance is not that of the correspondence between portrait and sitter, whom most of us do not know, but that of prompting a recognition. This takes place within a specific visual paradigm, within a particular representational tradition, which then permits the recognition of the image as a portrait. The identification is thus a different matter, one which depends not upon likeness between portrait and sitter but presupposes a knowledge of other codes, of historic elements and details or of allegorical attributes.

Resemblance and memory. In the opinion of David Hume, 1739, “Resemblance depends on the memory which raises up the image of past perceptions […] memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions in continuing association”. The similarity of a portrait is a construction which cannot be measured by the yardstick of veracity but rather by the coinciding of perceptions which have been triggered by the subject. The portrait and memory (mnemonic?) techniques, from the etymology of *retraho* as *rursus respicio, memoria repeto*.

From time immemorial, and until the twentieth century avant-garde, the portrait arbitrates the very definition of painting. This is the main premise of the International Springtime Academy and which will be tackled in the ensuing thematic sections, which, however, are not necessarily restrictive but merely indicative as are the following examples:

1. *The portrait and anthropology*

How can the practice of portraiture contribute to a more general consideration on the anthropological status of the image, or, more specifically, on the work of art? It is possible here, for example, to suggest a series of elements which are equally effective/dynamic in portraiture and which could be the object of interdisciplinary research: the archetypes of the double and of the mask; the exorcism of death and the simulation/simulacrum of presence; the function of memory, or, on the contrary, the incorporation in the image of material pertaining to the referent; and, finally, the dimension of the sacred and of magic.

1. *Genre and the portrait; canons and codes*

Renaissance and Neoplatonic treatises founded the legitimation of the portrait upon the principle of resemblance, and consequently asserted the implicit inferiority of this genre with respect to the painting of ideas (?) How and how far has this canon become the object of critical research and revision both from the point of view of theory and from that of practice? What are the roles played by such different factors as the ambiguous function of the mirror, the implications of *decorum*, the difference between physical similarity and moral truth, or, again, the importance of memory techniques, which permit the realization that resemblance is simply artifice complying with a specific semiotic code.

1. *The theories of physiognomy and pathognomy*

What was the impact of the theories of physiognomy on the practice and reception of the portrait? To what extent was the creation of a table of character types able to influence the search for veracity? Nowadays, especially since the adoption of photography, how has the definition of an anonymous type such as the superposed portraits by Francis Galton or the photos by August Sander, been able to negate the concept of individual identity? And again, how far, today, does the portrait come to realize the impossibility of recognizing any identity at all, witness the examples of Francis Bacon, Arnold Rainer and others? And to what extent can the actual being represented in a portrait determine recognition, if this is not the very existence of a social group?

1. *The portrait and society*

Control is without any doubt at the basis of the origin of the portrait. In what way did the expectations of the different social classes, in different historical periods, and from different social backgrounds and of different mental development, contribute to the definition of the codes of portraiture? And, again, what were the basic requirements for the practice of portrait painting (the organization of the studio, the interaction between painter and model, the social role of the painter, the significance of the costume, etc.)?

In the contemporary context, what was, or is still the role played by problems of gender and ethnicity in relation to the portrait, and what practices have they instigated (disguise/cross-dressing is one example)?

1. *Typologies*

Following these methods has it been possible to establish well-defined typologies of the portrait (and there is a considerable number of these) such as that of the man of power, or of the artist, the heroic portrait or that of the lover, going on to that of the codified portrait, in which the subject corresponds to the codes of myth or history? For all these types of portrait, currently defined as “role” portraits, what is the difference between identity and identification, between the display of external appearance and the insinuation of details appertaining to a more existential sphere? How, for example, is it possible to interpret the denotative meaning of a set of elements, linked by this context, imparted both by pose and by codified features, directed and recognised by the society to which they belong? What was the reception of these images and the meaning they acquired during their diffusion? And, finally, to what extent may all these elements contribute towards conditioning it?

*6) The Portrait and the “Comparison”*

Is it possible to argue an antagonism between painting and sculpture in the practice of portraiture? And again, what is the relationship between the literary portrait, codified from the Renaissance onwards in the *genre* of *Lives* or of *Viri Illustres*? What is the relationship between biography and portrait? To what extent can the presence of details or allegorical attributes, which are communicated directly in the figural portrait, suggest the biography of the character represented?

*7) The Portrait today. The new media*

How has the *genre*  of portraiture been discussed from Symbolism to the contemporary world, through the use of the different tools offered by the psychology of perception and psychoanalysis? What are the identification procedures, which have been evinced thanks to these new perspectives, between painter and model? In what way has the *genre* of portraiture been changed, whether by the consciousness of fragmented and impermanent identity, or by the continual interest of avant-garde art for the metalinguistic aspect of painting, which has compromised the importance of the subject?

What is the importance of photography for the portrait, especially when considering certain tendencies of contemporary art, such as performance, *arte povera,* or conceptual art? How much, above all, has the semiotic reading of portraiture been influenced by photography, with the antagonism between its meaning as an icon and its meaning as an index, considering not only the resemblance to but the impression of the referent? Finally, what is the role played by video and recent digital technology, with their deconstruction and manipulation of the gaze?

*8. The self-portrait*

Since the origins of self-portraiture, what are the practices of alienation and the objectifying of the self, in answer to a series of socially codified expectations? What are the variations, or articulations of the self-portrait as *genre* of the portrait of the artist? How much does the self-portrait contribute to the search for identity? And especially, what questions are raised by the case of the feminine self-portrait? From another linguistic perspective, what is the role of the mirror or the gaze in the construction of a picture?

It could also be possible to ask to what extent the criss-crossing of disciplinary interference has conditioned the practice of contemporary self-portraiture.