
Beyond Appearances: Modernist Portraiture

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While many kinds of art represent the human image, portraiture is the genre solely dedicated to representing the individual person. European portraiture grew out of and testified to a belief in the correlation between exterior appearances and interior qualities. Skepticism about that correlation can be seen in the literary and artistic experiments of the later nineteenth century, leading to a rupture in the conventions of portraiture in the early twentieth century. Interestingly, it was primarily through female portraiture that this process took place. This history tells us something about the human image and the limits of its meaning.

In Europe, the individual painted portrait emerged at the end of the Middle Ages and reached its highest development in the seventeenth century.¹ The rise of Protestantism, private wealth, and ideas of individual identity contributed to the development of portraiture. Charles Taylor has chronicled the discovery of the modern self in this era, a discovery also aided by the use of mirrors, diaries, and conduct manuals.² Descartes's "Cogito ergo sum"—I think therefore I am—was its philosophical articulation. To be sure, women were not credited with interiority to the same degree as men, and depicting physical beauty remained the artist's top priority in female portraiture. Nonetheless, we see thoughtful expressions on women's as well as men's faces in seventeenth-century portraits, especially from the Netherlands, where women enjoyed more education and legal rights than in the rest of Europe.

Along with hailing and exploring the dimensions of modern selfhood, the European portrait served other ideological purposes throughout the period of its cultural dominance, crowned in 1856 by the establishment of the National Portrait Gallery in London. For over three centuries, portraiture

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1. See, for example, Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); and Norbert Schneider, *The Art of the Portrait: Masterpieces of European Portrait-Painting, 1420-1670*. Translated by Iain Galbraith (New York: Benedikt Taschen, 1999). For fuller references to the topics alluded to in this short paper, see my *The Modern Portrait Poem from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).
 2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. Chapter 8. See also Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially Roger Smith, "Self-Reflection and the Self," 49-60, and Peter Burke, "Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes," 17-28.

reinforced and advanced an ideology of appearances that operated at every level of society and in many discourses ranging from literature to forensics. This ideology held that physical traits could be read to reveal a person's individual character. Such traits included hair and skin coloring, body size and type, the shape of the skull, cheekbones, and nose, facial expressions, gesture and gait, and so on. Appearance was thought to indicate personality, intelligence, social rank, degree of religious belief, chastity or promiscuity, and propensity to commit crimes, among other qualities. The European portrait thus represented and indeed yoked together two not necessarily compatible beliefs: belief in an interior self capable of independent thoughts and choices, and belief in the legible correlation between physical features and character traits.³ While these two beliefs may not directly conflict, the deterministic view of character that underlies the ideology of appearances is in tension with a robust concept of interiority and freedom of thought.

This tension is very much on view in the Victorian era. While committed to ideas of personal responsibility and individual virtue, Victorian culture also generated multiple discourses professing the intelligibility of physical appearances, such as phrenology, which linked a person's character to the shape of the skull. Victorian sentimental fiction served to reinforce a code of symbolic correlations by matching external physical features to internal character traits. Each character type in the sentimental novel is discernible via physical appearance, and none so consistently as the stock figure of the chaste girl or woman, who is invariably thin, delicate, and fair in coloring. She embodies virtue in the sense that every aspect of her appearance testifies to her goodness. In poetry, this code of appearances was distilled in a minor genre, the female verse portrait. In the Victorian portrait poem, the poet describes a woman (or a picture of a woman) whose skin, facial structure, and eyes proclaim her innocence and honesty (terms that apply both to her character and her physical chastity). In "A Portrait" of 1844, Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes "a forehead fair and saintly, / Which two blue eyes undershine, / Like meek prayers before a shrine."⁴ Similarly, in "Emma: Verses Suggested by a Portrait," the Quaker poet Bernard Barton describes Emma's "Eyes of mild and thoughtful tone, / Forehead-where no care is shown," linking her "simple loveliness" with her "guileless heart."⁵ Similarly, Frederick Locker-Lampson's 1857 "On 'A Portrait of a Lady' By the Painter" asserts, "She is good, for she must have a guileless mind / With that noble, trusting air... / She is lovely and good; she has frank blue eyes... / With her wistful mouth, and her candid brow."⁶ And in "Portrait of a Lady" of 1886, Scottish poet John Stuart Blackie declares,

3. For an exposition of the legibility of appearances in the Victorian era, see David Peters Corbett on the pre-eminent Victorian portraitist, George Frederic Watts, in Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848-1914* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2004), 146. See also Barlow, "Facing the Past and Present: The National Portrait Gallery and the Search for 'Authentic Portraiture,'" in Woodall, *Portraiture*, 219-238.

4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Poetical Works* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1882), 383.

5. Bernard Barton, *Household Verses* (London: George Virtue, 1845), 150.

6. Frederick Locker-Lampson, *London Lyrics, 1857* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 131.

Oh, she is lovely! all the summer dwells
 In her bright eyes, and every feature tells
 A treasured sweetness in the soul within,
 That beats like music through the lucid skin....
 She knows no falseness; even the courtliest lie
 She dreams not; truth flows from her deep blue eye...⁷

The poet's insistence on the female sitter's honesty serves the ideological purposes of the genre; the possibility of lying would throw off the whole scheme. Indeed, fainting, blushing, and especially crying are common narrative devices in sentimental fiction, used to underscore the female body's truth-telling. The uncritical use of such devices might show that the Victorians were not very smart, or, more likely, they may reflect a widespread anxiety that, in fact, appearances are *not* universally and unfailingly legible. If they were, no special reader's guide to the body would be necessary. Indeed, the con man is a stock character of sentimental fiction, whose unmasking reasserts the transparency of appearances that his existence undermines.

Dissent from the ideology of appearances was inevitable and powerful.⁸ While portraiture remained a significant genre in both literature and painting, it served increasingly as an occasion to repudiate the moralistic correlation of appearance and character. In the 1860s, painters on both sides of the English Channel began experimenting with inscrutable facial expressions and baffling props that withheld the usual assurances about the sitter's character, religious inclinations, and social status. The enigmatic individuals in Edouard Manet's single-figure compositions present blank faces and even their dress seems intended either to conceal their identity or mislead us about their social status. Some paintings are self-consciously staged; in *Mademoiselle V... in the Costume of an Espada*, we know the woman portrayed is not the bullfighter she is dressed up to look like; in others, we just don't know the sitter's social identity, still less what she thinks (see *Young lady in 1866* and the *Bar aux Folies-Bergère*). The sitter for many of these portraits was not a paying client but a paid model, Victorine Meurent. Herself a painter and musician, Meurent occupied an ambiguous social position. Manet's viewers often accused him of painting prostitutes in the guise of respectable women.⁹ This accusation reflected the reality of women's lives in nineteenth-century Paris: in order to afford the fashionable clothing required by their jobs, many shop assistants moonlighted as prostitutes by night.¹⁰ Their daytime appearance did not assure their respectability. Cutting straight to the social anxieties of late nineteenth-century France,

7. John Stuart Blackie, *Messis Vitae: Gleanings of Song from a Happy Life* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 73.

8. Dorothy Ross identifies the second half of the nineteenth century as a period of increasing skepticism in all areas of life and intellectual disciplines; see *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 1.

9. See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), especially Chapter 2, "Olympia's Choice."

10. See Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), especially "The Failure of Regulationism," 115-185.

Manet asked his viewers to consider if there was really any difference between a prostitute and a respectable woman, and more profoundly, whether the status of her body and dress can tell us anything about the character, still less the thoughts, of a person. Manet is considered the father of modern art because his paintings foreground their own painted surfaces and their status as representations.¹¹ Rather than windows to a world, his paintings present themselves as canvases. The social ambiguity of his female figures is not an accidental aspect of his modernism: challenging the ideology of appearances is a key feature of modern art. Without denying the significance of interiority, Manet is simply agnostic about the possibility of knowing it through appearances.

In England, the art-for-art's-sake movement emphasized female physical beauty as an end in itself, rather than a sign of moral virtue. Rossetti's striking portraits also deny us access to the sitter's thoughts and character. His sitters always have the same vacant, self-absorbed look whether they are presented to us as figures of virtue (*Sibylla Palmifera*, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, *The Salutation of Beatrice*), sensuality (*Bocca Baciata*, *Regina Cordium*) or danger (*Lady Lilith*). Like Manet, Rossetti used the same model for many of his portraits, Elizabeth Siddal, a painter and poet who became his wife. The flat, decorated surfaces of Rossetti's canvases suggest that we may be seeing all there is: we're not asked to look through the windows of the soul.

The celebrated and scandal-prone American painter James McNeill Whistler, who associated both with French Realists and English Decadents, exploited the possibilities of ambiguous appearances in his portraits of women, especially Joanna Hiffernan, also a model. In *The Little White Girl*, later *Symphony in White No. 2*, Whistler suggests that the figure in the painting is pure representation, again like Manet. Our clearest view of the sitter's face is in the mirror, where her head is framed by the reflection of one of Whistler's own paintings hanging on the opposite wall. The back of the sitter's head is framed by another painting to the left, and her body is supported and framed by the fireplace. Painted in 1864, this work exhibits elements of Japonisme that Whistler had adopted in Paris: the ceramic jar on the mantle, the painted fan she holds, and sprays of azaleas, a recently introduced Asian plant that, unlike European flowers, carried no specific connotations in the Victorian language of flowers. The azaleas do nothing to help us interpret the meaning of the sitter's look: pensiveness, melancholy, longing, regret? Her image is no more meaningful than the blurred landscapes reflected in the mirror or the abstractly rendered scene on the fan: it's an arrangement of color and line.

Algernon Swinburne, a younger member of the Rossetti circle, wrote a poem to accompany Whistler's painting, entitled "Before the Mirror," in which he articulated the doctrine of aestheticism. He begins in the tradition of the Victorian portrait poem by asking the painting to reveal its secrets:

11. An argument elaborated by Michael Fried in *Manet's Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Behind the veil, forbidden,
Shut up from sight,
Love, is there sorrow hidden,
Is there delight?

The figure in the painting answers by interpreting her own reflection in the mirror:

“ I cannot see what pleasures
Or what pains were;
What pale new loves and treasures
New years will bear;
What beam will fall, what shower,
What grief or joy for dower;
But one thing knows the flower; the flower is fair.”

The poem suggests that personal interiority is a kind of *mise en abîme*, leading back into successive reflections or representations; the only stable meaning to be found is in beauty itself. While the Victorian portrait poem guides us from physical traits to inner qualities, Swinburne’s “Before the Mirror” embraces appearances as an aesthetic end rather than a means to a moral.

Such ambiguous or inscrutable paintings of women dramatized as early as the 1860s that the ideology of appearances limited and circumscribed the scope of painting. Painters who were free to experiment with portraiture without having to please paying clients increasingly emphasized the pictorial aspects of their subject rather than a narrative or message about character. From Whistler it is but a small step to the abstract designs of Matisse’s portraits of his wife (*Madras Rouge*) and his collector Auguste Pellerin, or portraits by Georges Braque (*Woman with a Mandolin*) and Picasso (*Head of a Woman*). Analytic cubism makes a complete rupture—not with representation itself, because we can still tell that a human being is depicted—but with the ideology of appearances. Where feeling is represented in the painting, it is not the sitter’s feeling (her piety, sympathy, pride) but the painter’s feeling towards her (see Matisse’s *The Green Stripe* and *The Conversation*). The exuberant freedom that modernist art exudes is not just a freedom from aesthetic convention, but also from a worn-out belief system dictating the moral meaning of appearances. In particular, modernist portraits of women celebrate freedom from the requirement to flatter the sitter and ensure the legibility of her virtue. A perfect case in point is Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein of 1906, which combines a heavy, masculine body with an impassive, mask-like face that is considered one of the starting-places of cubism. Stein’s freedom from social convention and her fearless avant-garde experimentation gave Picasso permission to experiment in his own way.

While turn-of-the-century painters embraced physical appearances as a sufficient subject for their canvases, this approach was hardly adequate for fiction and poetry. An alternative was to ignore

physical appearance and focus on interiority. Perhaps the most famous fictional portrait of the nineteenth century was Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), a deep exploration of a woman's self-cultivation and consciousness, with little reference to her outward looks. James's novel was an important precursor for modern explorations of consciousness by Joseph Conrad, Ford Maddox Ford, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot. One of the most notable literary portraits of the modernist period is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which renders the subject entirely from the inside, experimenting with stream-of-consciousness techniques that became hallmarks of modernist fiction. Gertrude Stein also composed a series of short prose portraits, many concerning painters in her circle such as Picasso and Matisse. These works experiment with language and seldom make reference to the physical appearance of her subjects.

Modernist portrait poems are numerous, including T. S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," Ezra Pound's "Portrait d'une femme" and the portrait sequence "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," and William Carlos Williams's "Portrait of a Lady" and "Portrait of a woman in Bed." Significantly, the reference point for these works is not visual. Unlike the Victorian portrait poem, which typically begins with a physical description of the sitter from life or from a picture, the woman's appearance rarely plays a role in the modernist portrait poem. Instead, her personality, opinions, memory, and attitudes are on display. We do not think of Eliot and Pound as socially or politically progressive, only as rebels against literary convention; they fought for freedom from censorship, not for female suffrage. Yet an aspect of their nonconformity was to refuse the ideology of appearances, which is more than a theory of representation; it is a set of social expectations.

For example, take Ezra Pound's "Portrait d'une femme" (1912), most likely a sketch of Florence Farr, a well-known Edwardian actress and writer who collaborated with both George Bernard Shaw and W. B. Yeats.

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
 London has swept about you this score years
 And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
 Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
 Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.¹²

Pound's portrait describes Farr not as possessing a physical body at all, but rather consisting of all the memories, "spars of knowledge" and tributes that she has gathered to herself over the years. While Pound suggests that she lacks originality, he pays this New Woman her due by making her mind, not her body, the subject of the portrait. Indeed, every time in the poem when he seems to mention a physical object, such as "The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work; / Idols and ambergris and rare inlay," it turns out that these are metaphors for what she knows or remembers.

12. Ezra Pound, *Ripostes* (London: Stephen Swift & Co., 1912), 17.

She is her recollections. And, indeed, this portrait of Farr is a fitting account of the poet himself, whose poetry in this period consists mainly of skillful pastiche and allusion—a hoard of literary recollections. “Portrait d’une femme” both portrays the subject and mirrors the artist. Release from the ideology of appearances meant that writers could begin to explore the true complexity of the human mind, its capacity for exceeding the boundaries of the individual and combining with other minds, and its freedom to transcend the body’s temporal and spatial limits. While appearances still have an inordinate influence on how we think of each other in the twenty-first century, the legacy of modernist portraiture provides a healthy check on our impulse to judge others by how they look.