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PORTRAIT PAINTING

by
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When I was asked to ^{write} talk on Portrait Painting, my first reaction was hesitation. Portrait painting is too vast a subject to be analysed and successfully discussed in the short space of a broadcast. But on second thought I felt, perhaps, some of my observations based on practical experience, may be of some definite interest to a few listeners. ^{of the readers.}

If we approach Portraiture historically we see that this branch of Art is almost as important as Religious Art, and in a way these two are the earliest and most complete expressions of the Art of Painting and Sculpture.

Tradition or Legend tell us that the primitive Artist drew an outline of the shadow cast by a profile and produced the first likeness, the first portrait. Whether this was so or not, we know that shadows have been very often outlined and this even gave birth to the Art of the Silhouette which was quite popular some time ago. Historically the Art of the Portrait, whether in painting or in sculpture, plays a most important and unique role. This branch of Art gives us a ready access to the past and often to the otherwise unrecorded pages of history.

What priceless pages of Characterisation and Visualisation of Epochs we would miss were it not for these always living records? The Ancient Kings of Egypt and their Great Initiate Priests live for us today in stone and in painting.

Greece and Rome have given us a priceless series of portraits perhaps unsurpassed in craftsmanship and beauty. Outside of their purely artistic merit these paintings and sculptures permit us to contact the past directly, they give us an instantaneous communion with a person and indirectly with the Epoch itself.

The dress, the surroundings, they tell their own tale and to the keen observer the years bygone live again and unfold their veiled secrets.

^{think} These records of the past when painted or moulded by the inspired hand of the Great Master give us an unerring insight into the character of the subject depicted, even into the circumstances surrounding the image, into the past itself. We can reconstruct the culture and life of the Italian Renaissance so well, thanks to the vast accumulation of pictorial material. The life of the Spanish Court is mirrored in the paintings of a Velasquez or a Goya, while a Cluet depicts France, and Holbein gives us a pageant of portraits of several countries and courts. Great artists like Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, El Greco, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt etc., etc., worked at portraits and besides their great paintings left us a remarkable series of precious documents. Where would our visualisation of the past be without this dazzling array of personalities, who often made History, and ^{and} who were the artists of our present day happiness and plights. One could not in the course of a short talk even begin to cover all the implications of this Branch of Art, suffice it to say that today it stands as important in its Essence, as it was in the days past and the advent of photography has in no way diminished its significance.

On the contrary photography can be even of great help to portrait painting, as it can be to any other branch of Art when properly used.

The difficulties which beset the portrait artist in the creation of a portrait are very many. Many of them are purely technical, as very often conditions are such, as to make even the actual process of painting very strenuous.

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The famous American
portrait painter Sargent.

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Many of these difficulties have given rise to certain conventionalities, which can be faced only by a very good artist. Sargent was once asked by a prospective art student advice in regard to his artistic career, he wanted to study art in order to become a portrait painter. With his usual frankness Sargent answered him; "First of all you become an artist and then you can choose your special line. The conventionalities of portrait painting are only tolerable in a good artist, if you are only a portrait painter you are a nobody".

In this connection we may also recall Vandyke's answer when a hopeful Father once brought to him his son for apprenticeship and said that his son already knew how to paint the background for a portrait: "Well", said Vandyke, "then he has nothing else to learn", meaning that the choice of a background was almost as important as the portrait itself.

Of the many difficulties present whenever a portrait is being painted posing is perhaps, the greatest. Very few people are good sitters and very few realise that good posing is essential to a successful painting. Again very often the models are not willing to give a sufficient number of sittings, or sufficiently long sittings. One long sitting will often do more than series of short sittings, when the artist often is further limited by the physical properties of the materials used. We must always remember that a good portrait is more than just an accidental likeness. It is the sum total of numerous observations of the sitter in different moods by the artist. The Great French artist Ingres used to devote the entire first sitting to the study of his Model. The portrait painter can through his developed power of observation and experience record and emphasise those features and characteristic accents which to him are the most essential, the most telling, the most worthwhile of recording.

He has the facility on the other hand to obliterate or render less prominent the less important ones that may otherwise detract from the whole. The unerring sense of beauty of a Great Artist guides him in this process of selection.

The whole process of painting or modelling a portrait is a process of building up, where every stroke or complimentary colouring carries its own special significance and has the power of enhancing the entire effect.

The degree of Co-ordination between the artist and the sitter or model, was and is also a most important factor. There is, so to say, a collaboration, a silent communion and the result is a fine painting or sculpture, which carries within itself some unaccountable part of the sitter's presence. Take the great, historical example of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. This painting one of the most treasured masterpieces we possess, seems to live its own mysterious life, as if Mona Lisa was present here herself.

But as almost everything else it is not always, unfortunately, that a great portrait is either acclaimed or even appreciated at the time of its creation. Numerous are the instances when a portrait, later acclaimed as a world masterpiece, was at first condemned by the sitter and by the sitter's immediate entourage and even by critics. Let us recall Sargent's great portrait of Mme. Gautreau considered by many and by himself his masterpiece. The storm over this painting, when it was first exhibited in the Paris Salon, was so great that Sargent had to leave Paris and settle in London. This, we know, was his making, but the episode remains as a very forceful illustration of what we have pointed out. Years passed, Mme. Gautreau's portrait is the proud possession of the Metropolitan Museum of New York. Or let us recall the controversies over Whistler's masterpiece: "The portrait of his Mother and Rodins Statue of Balzac."

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A Tribute to Sargent's mastery.

Even Gainsborough, in his day, was not exempt of this criticism and once he was taken to task for the apparant roughness of his brushwork on some sitter's features. An observation which called forth his polite rejoinder that one should not contemplate a painting from too near, as some paints have an unpleasant smell. The sitter is forgotten long ago, the episode makes us smile, the roughness of the treatment remains, and above everything towers the genius of Gainsborough, immortal in his contribution to Culture and a Glory of the 18th Century. *Recently*
~~In a recent number of the Magazine Time we we come across a very curious,~~
was yet very significant reevaluation of Raphael's work. The reason for this article ~~is a new~~ book on Raphael. The conclusion arrived at is that in spite of the more recent critics, Raphael has a right to his age old reputation of a supreme Master. And this he certainly is, since all the critics who tried to find fault never came up to even a fraction of his excellence, which is further enhanced by his very early death. *was*

We could easily cite the innumerable instances of difficulties, many quite humourous, when viewed impartially, that arise in the course of a portrait artist's career, and it is mainly due to this that the great Portraitists usually retired from this field of Art and concentrated on those fields which depended in a greater degree on their individual creativeness. After all no matter how great and successful a portraitist may be he can never be *sure* of pleasing his model or those who order a portrait. This is mainly due to the fact that everyone has a preconceived idea of what she or he should look like as well as to the inability to grasp or visualise the technical difficulties that often lie in the way of rendering certain features or expressions in a particular way without affecting thereby the whole.

I am not trying to justify the portraitist, but the prospective model has the advantage of studying first a portrait artist's work and then making up his or her mind whether the style and type of work this artist does, will suit and satisfy the particular requirements. *would be*

Time being short I conclude, *but* in conclusion I will say that a model, who wishes to cooperate with the artist, serves not only his or her own interest, but the interests of Art as well, as it gives unbounded joy to every true Artist to have the opportunity of creating a true work of art with the ready and conscious co-operation of his model.
