
Editorial Introduction

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In 2007, the Portrait Gallery of Canada, a programme of Library and Archives Canada, will open in the old U.S. Embassy in Ottawa, and Canada will join the list of nations that represent themselves through a collection of portraits. In doing so, it will invoke a well-established means of recognizing and figuring national communities. National collections of portraits already exist in Sweden, England, Scotland, the United States, and Australia. Associated with the modern nation state, a national collection of portraits is only the most recent form of a representational practice (the making and assembling of portraits) that has flourished in various forms across millennia, in contexts that range from the highly polished to the wholly amateur. Works covered by the generic term “portrait” contain a multitude of forms and functions, one of which is situated in discourses of national identity and history – but what is the currency of the “national” portrait? And what contributions can art history make to a discussion and elucidation of the significance of portraits to national histories and national identities? In this issue of *RACAR*, we have gathered together texts that explore in detail elements in the varieties of portraiture. The articles cover portraits in various media, made between the sixteenth century and the present, in Canada, Europe, and around the world. The guest editors hope that these texts will both indicate the current state of art historical scholarship in portraiture, and suggest the directions in which research might move in order to create a framework for describing and interpreting the potential meanings of a national portrait collection.

The issue has been edited jointly by two art historians, one of whom is a university teacher and the other of whom is a curator. It includes contributions from the inaugural director of the Portrait Gallery of Canada and academics working across disciplines and in three countries. The collective product thus represents a range of professional interests in portraiture, and is an international collaboration.¹ If the contributing authors’ subjects and affiliations are diverse, the articles collected here address some common themes that need to be explored in order to give a useful account of the relationships between a nation and its portraits. Portraits are notoriously resistant to – or perhaps evasive is a better word – discussion in conventional terms of art historical debate, largely because they straddle the worlds of “autonomous” art and documentary form. As one recent writer on portraits has expressed it, “portraiture as an artistic genre has remained understudied, aesthetically problematic, and critically suspect” because of its persistent attachment to a referent.² It is clearly this feature that distinguishes portraiture as a subject for a national collection: portraiture speaks through many languages, and not just the disciplines of “art.”

The interpretive problems that arise from this status might be expressed through the following questions: Is a portrait primarily evidence of the expressive powers of the artist, or of the presence of the sitter? How do we understand the relationship between a portrait and the life of the individual it depicts? How can we make sense of the ways in which portraits have articulated values for their makers, sitters, and owners?

What distinguishes portraiture as a genre is its concern to inscribe and represent individuals, or groups of individuals. This purposeful aspect of portraiture has understandably defined its traditional methods of interpretation. Connoisseurs have typically been interested in evaluating how well an artist performs in the role of depicter of individuals, while art historical interpretation of portraits has largely been concerned with understanding and describing the mechanisms through which portraits achieve those descriptions. These accounts often correlate portrait features to features of character – a straightforward physiognomic reading – although latterly the physiognomy has tended to be represented as one of a social, rather than an individual, body. The emphasis on describing and interpreting portraiture’s representation of individual sitters has evolved with the discipline’s tools. For example, the deployment of psychoanalytic theory has provided an alternative version of individuality within which we can explain and discuss the portrait and its relationship to a sitter’s “self.” But whichever way we envision the emergence of the self – through simple embodiment, through psychic processes, through social interaction, or in some combination of the three – the iconographic (or indexical, as some may prefer) relationship between the self and the image has been the focus of most studies of portraiture.

The portrait’s close relationship with the individual sitter who is its subject accords it a unique role as historical document or evidence, a function that has been given a particular prominence at the Portrait Gallery of Canada. Uniquely amongst modern national portrait collections, Canada’s Portrait Gallery will be part of the national archives and library rather than a national art collection. Moreover, the archival function of portraits in its collection is not one that attaches to conventional notions of national greatness: the Portrait Gallery of Canada will collect not only portraits of the prominent, but also of those who are now nameless or whose historical identities are invested in collective roles rather than individual ones. This aspect of the Portrait Gallery of Canada’s collection deploys the most familiar role of the portrait as a carrier of the likeness, and an (if not *the*) identity of its sitter. This most contested of portraiture’s functions is explored in two of the essays, which begin from the premise that portraits can and do construct an identity for the sitter. The means by which this construction is

achieved is presented as a problem for exploration rather than a series of cultural givens.

The essays that are concerned with issues of likeness and identity in portraiture deal with their subjects in ways that sidestep simple correlations of portrait with sitter. The article by Monique Gibson and Chantal Silverman, “Sur/Rendering Her Image: The Unknowable Harriet Tubman,” details the careful negotiation with conventions of likeness and representing identity that are evident in a portrait of the woman now known as Harriet Tubman. What is notable about Tubman’s portrait is its defiance of, rather than coherence with, conventions of representing black women in nineteenth-century North America. This persona of resistance is one that the authors represent as the historically mythologized rather than the “true” image of Tubman, susceptible to being incorporated into narratives of Canada as a nation of liberty and equality.

In this text the identity of the sitter is not exactly obscured by the portrait, but is not exactly revealed by it either. The portrait functions as a representation that corresponds with the sitter’s historic role. The fragility of such representations is suggested by Cynthia Foo in her essay, “Portrait of a Globalized Canadian: Ken Lum’s *There Is No Place Like Home*.” Lum’s work pairs texts with images in ways that make each slowly break the other down, and might finally erode the principle of the visual transcription of social identities on which the portrait is founded. This strategy of deploying a portrait in order to subvert it is a familiar one for the portrait in contemporary art practice, as in Cindy Sherman’s famous reworking of her “self” in endless incarnations of apparently differentiated individuals, or Hiroshi Sugimoto’s black-and-white photographs of wax sculptures, which endow inanimate objects with eerily human presences. In the work of all of these artists the portrait is both convincing and fraudulent, and the two states are held in tension within the image. Works like these expose the failure of the portrait to invoke anything reliable or meaningful about the individual it (appears to) depict. If anything, the images and their manner of production insist on the extent to which a portrait may disguise, rather than reveal or represent, its sitter.

Sherman’s and Sugimoto’s are but two of the better-known examples of bodies of work that prise into the conventions of resemblance and likeness to expose the emptiness of the portrait image. Most often in contemporary art, if not portrait practice *per se*, portrait images are developed within this cynical approach to the genre of portraiture – an approach that was proclaimed by the title of one recent exhibition to herald the “death of the portrait.”³ If this destabilized approach to the relationship between portrait and sitter is appropriate in contemporary art practice, it has problematic repercussions for the development of documentary interpretations. Bringing portraiture and its protagonists into a common field of analysis is an

interesting provocation, but also may have its limits of usefulness: is it possible also to assert differences between Ken Lum’s photographic work and, for example, the photograph of Harriet Tubman? Foo’s essay takes the photographic nature of Lum’s work and its concern with identity as sufficient grounds for identifying it as portraiture, but it is not, as in the longer tradition of likenesses, chiefly concerned with the elaboration of the individuals who are its sitters. How, or when, we might want to distinguish portraiture as a genre is a question that warrants further research and consideration, especially in view of the documentary status it is accorded in major collections like that of the Portrait Gallery of Canada.

If the status of portraiture as a document is fragile, are there other, more secure discourses of value through which to interpret these images? One of the points that is made powerfully in this collection is the extent to which portraits should not be relegated to the commodified discourses of art, which focus on the signature of the maker; the language of aesthetic mastery or artistic value entirely fails to capture what is significant about portraits. All of the texts in this issue of *RACAR* are to some extent considerations of the ways in which their portrait subjects are enmeshed in frameworks of value that extend far beyond the frames of the objects themselves. This feature is characteristic of contemporary art historical writing and might be attributed to the fashions of the discipline. However, several of the authors are concerned to make the point that their research reveals that the social, rather than the aesthetic, functions of portraiture constitute the rationale both of historical practices of portrait collecting and making, and of present interpretation. Anne-Elisabeth Vallée’s “L’Intérêt et les limites de la recherche sur l’art de la miniature au Canada,” a discussion of the portrait miniatures in the collection of Library and Archives Canada, perhaps makes this point most clearly in its confrontation with the extent of anonymity that now attends the collection. The latter consists largely of the products of jobbing artists who had no purchase on (and perhaps no aspiration to) recognition and patronage on a scale that attracted the notice of the historical record; the names of both sitter and artist are often now detached from the object. The value of these objects cannot be found in their demonstration of an exemplary artistic practice, nor in their description of a historically significant or “valuable” sitter. If a portrait has neither biographical nor aesthetic value, does it have any value at all?

Chantal Turbide’s article, “Catherine de Médicis et le portrait: esquisse d’une collection royale au féminin,” investigates the alternative value systems within which portraits and portrait collections might be situated. Turbide offers a study of relatively early European portrait collecting, and exposes practices motivated by objectives unrelated to conventional forms of art-commodity value. Her study focuses on the political, dynastic,

and affective motives of a portrait collector for whom the public and private, political and personal, were powerfully intertwined. The value of a portrait collection of a queen of France in the *ancien régime* resided in the way that it testified to her access to individuals and power, and not in the value of the objects themselves. The political/familial co-ordinates of the collection have been negligible in art historical interpretations that privilege the object (and men's political power).

For Turbide, the value of the portrait is in its capacity to recognize the contextual importance of the sitter who was its model, and not in the aesthetic nature of the object itself, or even its "likeness" to the sitter. The value of the portrait is found in the way that it recognizes a sitter's status or relationship to a spectator, and serves as a token as well as a symbol in a social transaction. The portrait has a value that we might characterize as performative: it is not what the portrait is, but what it does that makes it significant.⁴ This perspective on portraiture does not entail a significant move away from accepted conventions of the relationship between portrait and individual; it is a formulation of that relationship that reflects the changing notion of the subject. This approach to interpreting portraits has as its premise a performative theory of the subject, such as that advanced by Judith Butler, in which the individual is understood as being defined through action in a situation, rather than in any absolute sense. In this convention, the portrait, as well as the individual, acquires substance and value through its role in a transaction or an exchange between sitters, artists, donors, commissioners, and viewers. It is not the static object, but the object in action and in use that is of interest. This is not just a matter of putting an object in context – of developing a description of the setting of its production and reception. It is a question of seeing the object as being constituted through its agency, and not *vice versa*.

On some level, all of the texts assembled in this issue work with this kind of model of portraits – hence the emphasis on commission, display, and collection, rather than on the objects in stasis. Three of the essays are concerned exclusively with the transactions through which portraits can be said to be constituted, in their making, viewing, or in other kinds of social rituals. Meaghan Clarke's "(Re)Viewing Whistler and Sargent: portraiture at the *fin-de-siècle*" is a case study of portrait production that does not treat the process as one of mere transcription of a physical or social likeness. Clarke studies portraits as a specific kind of interaction between two individuals, in this case well-known male artists and their female critics. Together, artist and sitter produced images that defy the typical characterization of women's *fin-de-siècle* portraits as examples of active artist/passive sitter. Portraits as a means by which the politics of social hierarchy are negotiated is also the subject of Kristina Huneault's investigation of nineteenth-century portrait miniatures of First

Nations Canadians. She argues that the portrait miniatures are on the one hand "easy to overlook," but are also "a privileged avenue of access to subjectivity," particularly because of the kind of handling and interaction that they invite: Huneault explores this interaction as one which provided the medium for "cultural crossings" between colonized and colonizing peoples. Finally, Angela Carr's study, "Leaders, Legends and Felons: negotiating portraiture, from veneration to vandalism," explores examples of portraits in what might be called political actions: the physical discourses in which people use portraits as objects through which demonstrations of alliance (or its opposite) with individual sitters can be made. In all of these essays, the performative function, rather than the object itself, is the interest of the study.

What can these kinds of insights bring to the critical discourse that will provide the framework for the development of the Portrait Gallery of Canada? Most of the observations that we have drawn from these contributions can be addressed to any situation in which portraiture is being analysed. The making of a national portrait collection, however, presents difficult questions about the limits and extent of the nation, and the nature of its representability; in a globalized post-modern world, we have no recourse to easy abstractions of citizenship. The specific context of Canadian national identity and the cultural politics of its portraits is directly addressed in four of our essays: those by Foo, Gibson and Silverman, Huneault, and last but not least the essay contributed by photographic historian Lilly Koltun, the inaugural director of the Portrait Gallery of Canada ("A New Portrait Gallery for Canada: Stacking or Unpacking a National Narrative?"). All of these essays broach the subject with an acute sensitivity to the problematics of offering up a "nation" that is simultaneously unified and diverse, and that aspires to equality but is all too aware of the ways in which it falls short of that aspiration. Issues of racial identity within the nation and its portraits are therefore particularly present in these essays, although we regret that we received no submissions that dealt with First Nations art practice. We concur with Koltun that there is no reason to exclude First Nations art from the category of portraiture, and Huneault's essay offers a useful model for describing dialogue between First Nations and European art practice.

For each of the authors dealing with the Canadian context, portraits can embody – or be interpreted as testimony to – both the idealized whole and the fragmented experience of the Canadian nation. Koltun's observation that we "do not have to settle on one version" of a portrait, or indeed one version of the national history, alludes again to the status of the portrait and portrait collection in transition, in action, as a performing agent rather than a static subject. Developing the performative model of portraits and collections has implications for the ways that

historians, practitioners, conservators, and curators engage with portraits and other artworks. What we have presented here only begins to gesture toward what will be a new chapter in the relationship between Canadian art institutions and portraits: a chapter whose opening lines are not yet written. What we hope is that the essays in this issue will inspire many arts professionals to look afresh at portraiture and to reconsider its role in their practice.

Notes

- 1 Contributing scholars are connected with institutions in Canada, England, and France. Other contributors include the equal number of individuals who generously agreed to read texts as external reviewers, and we would like to take the time to thank them here although unfortunately the anonymity of the process means that they cannot be individually named.
- 2 Heather McPherson, *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 2001), 2. Other publications that consider the generic problems of portraiture include Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford, 2004); J. Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: facing the subject* (Manchester, 1997); and R. Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London, 1991).
- 3 *About Face: Photography and the Death of the Portrait*, exh. cat., London, Hayward Gallery (London, 2004).
- 4 Marcia Pointon developed this approach in her study of the tactile attractions of the miniature, "'Surrounded with Brilliants': Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 1 (2001), 48–71.