British Portraiture from 1750

Le portrait britannique depuis 1750

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This guest-edited issue of *Interfaces* originated in the international conference on British portraiture that took place in Bordeaux in September 2021 as a result of the collaboration between the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès (C.A.S.), the University of Bordeaux Montaigne (C.I.I.M.A.S.), the Musée du Louvre and the Fine Arts Museum of Bordeaux (MusBA Bordeaux). It explores portraiture as an artform that gained prominence in Britain in the 18th century, and extended beyond its geographical and generic boundaries to redefine and reinvent itself over time. The selection of essays included in this volume looks at the politics, aesthetics and ethics of British portraiture from the 18th century to the present digital age, its capacity to mediate individual as well as collective identities, its dialogue with European influences, and its wide circulation in an increasingly interconnected world.

The adaptability of portraiture is reflected in the etymology of the word itself which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, derives from the old 12th-century Anglo-Norman and Middle French verb “por-traire” (or “pourtraire”)—meaning to draw, to drag (a line)—and from the classical Latin “protrahere”—i.e. to draw forward, reveal, extend, protract, display over time. In its most common sense, portraying is to draw a visual representation of a person or a person’s face which will endure and be seen even after this person is gone.

This is famously illustrated in the myth of the Corinthian maid Kora of Sicyon, daughter of the potter Butades, who drew upon the wall the outline of her beloved’s shadow before their separation. This poetic explanation for the origin of painting, which was recounted by Pliny the Elder in *Natural History* (77-79 AD) after a Greek myth, became highly popular during the 18th century, when it was depicted by David Allan, Joseph Wright of Derby, Benjamin West, J. B. Regnault and other artists.

This story reveals our considerable emotional investment in acts of portrayal. Portraits tend to hold sway over our memory and imagination. Interestingly, the myth also attests to the intermedial, remedial and transmedial nature of portraiture and its
propensity to circulate, since Kora’s drawing ultimately prompted her father to model a face of the youth in clay, which he baked, and subsequently replicated and coloured for display throughout the town as architectural ornament.

More generally, portraiture can be understood as a privileged locus of mediation. For Richard Brilliant, making portraits has always been “a response to the natural human tendency to think about oneself, of oneself in relation to others, and of others in apparent relation to themselves and to others” (Brilliant 14). Thus, since the 18th century it has been a notable way of mediating identity, socio-economic or environmental relations and cross-cultural interactions, while the very elasticity of portraiture has ensured its capacity to cross generic boundaries and to reinvent itself over time, across media and through the adoption of new processes, technologies and formats.

Although art critics such as Nikolaus Pevsner were particularly eager in the 1950s to discern specifically national traits in art (the “Englishness” of English art), several contributions in this volume examine rather how the art of the portrait in Britain drew inspiration from European practices and influences. Bénédicte Miyamoto’s essay, on “Teaching portraits with method – the technology of grids, compasses and proportions in British drawing manuals”, examines how continental sources describing the measurements of the human body were translated, commercialized and cannibalized for use in British manuals. In “De la fête galante à la conversation entre les genres : la place de Philip Mercier dans l’évolution de l’art du portrait en Angleterre”, Vanessa Alayrac analyzes Mercier’s style of portraiture as the result of a transformation of French and continental artistic influences into an English artistic formula that suited the taste of his British patrons.

Even if Britain’s decisive contribution to 18th-century European painting was arguably the invention of the conversation piece, the portrait is more generally seen as the characteristic pictorial genre of the period. The famous names associated with this practice, Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and William Hogarth, should not eclipse a host of other artists, such as George Romney, Allan Ramsay and Thomas Lawrence. The genre of “face-painting”, as it was then known — be it the ceremonial portrait, the fancy picture or the family or group portrait — was by far the most successful and widespread pictorial genre in Britain.

Frédéric Ogée’s article, “Sociability and Portraiture from William Hogarth to Thomas Lawrence”, considers Lawrence as a privileged witness of the evolution of the representation of men and masculinity. His art offers an exceptional visual chronicle of what some critics have called “the new regime of individuality” of his age (Wahrman). Sarah Gould’s essay, “Thomas Gainsborough’s ‘Carelessness’: Portraiture, Technique and Individuality”, shows how Gainsborough too participated in this new regime of individuality in the age of sensibility and how he contributed to fashioning a new social public identity, for himself and for his sitters, by attending to issues of care vs. carelessness, both of which notions coalesce different tensions surrounding questions of identity at the time.

Recent theorists of portraiture, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, have emphasized that the portrait constitutes a crucial space of encounter between self and other, oscillating as it does between likeness, recognition, proximity and illusion, on the one hand, and strangeness, elusiveness, distance and questioning, on the other. Building on this inherent tension, Marcia Pointon’s seminal studies have explored portraiture as “an
unstable, destabilizing and potentially subversive art through which uncomfortable and unsettling convictions are negotiated” (Pointon 9). In particular, she notes, portraits raise major questions about our relation to history and documentary evidence; the visual status of the subaltern, faceless and voiceless; the gendered specificities of representation; the relation between face and personhood; and its value as trace, i.e. as an artform that engages with disappearance and death.

In her contribution to this volume, “Traces across Time: Investigating an Unfinished Female Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds”, Marcia Pointon revisits these issues by focusing on a partial portrait whose sitter has not yet been identified, in order to investigate its odd assemblage of motifs and its magnetic appeal, while teasing out the methodological and interpretive challenges such a work poses to the art historian. She also encourages us to reflect on how unfinished or enigmatic portraits force us to recalibrate our approach to portraiture and its relation to identity. Similarly focused on a portrait whose sitter is unknown, Melissa Percival’s essay, entitled “Decolonial Practices around ‘Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit’ (formerly ‘Portrait of an African’) in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), Exeter”, engages with a painting which has become a focal point for the current decolonizing work under way in British museums and academia and reflects on the sometimes conflicting imperatives of different constituencies and interest groups.

Concurrently with the immense popularity of portraiture among the British public, painters often showed themselves eager to transgress the narrow bounds imposed on this genre and called into question the hierarchy of pictorial genres then in force, in particular the supremacy of history painting. Hence the attempts of the theorist Jonathan Richardson (himself also a portraitist) to give the genre legitimacy and letters of nobility, in order to elevate it in this hierarchy by attributing to its practitioners skills similar to those of history painters (An Essay on the Theory of Painting, 1715). Indeed, as several contributors to this volume demonstrate, portraiture sometimes inflated into history painting when it chronicled its contemporary period or reflected history in the making, bringing the art of the portrait closer to the grand historical genre.

In some cases, portraiture expanded into mythological painting while borrowing seminal templates used in ancient artworks. Hélène Ibata’s essay, “From Heroic to Romantic: Reynolds’s Captain the Honourable Augustus Keppel (1752) and its Legacy”, argues that the portrait of Commodore Keppel by Reynolds, drawing on a posture inspired by classical statuary, not only acted as a variation on an ancient archetype, but also provided a template for the depiction of new types of national celebrities, such as intrepid explorers, throughout the years, until it was deconstructed by John Everett Millais’s North-West Passage (1874).

In the wake of the long 18th century which saw the significant development of portraiture, the rising middle classes during the 19th century contributed to its sustained popularity, with the opening in 1856 of the National Portrait Gallery, the first museum in the world dedicated exclusively to this genre. During Victoria’s long reign, royal patronage played a significant role, as the Queen’s many portrait painters were instrumental in consolidating the monarchical institution, Anglicanism and the bourgeois values embodied by Victoria, through their portraits of the royal family and important national events. Yet continental influences remained significant during the 19th century. Sara Vitacca’s study of G. F. Watts’s self-portraits, for example,
demonstrates that Venetian Renaissance painters played an important role in the development of the portrait as a typically British genre, in her article “Is that not Titian? Echoes of Venice in George Frederic Watts’s Self-Portraits, Between Self-Fashioning and Artistic Practice”.

The gendered specificities of representation within 19th-century celebrity culture are tackled by Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada in “Ideal yet Actual: Actresses Posing as Antique Heroines in Late-Victorian ‘Classical’ Portraits”. Her study of the portraits of Ellen Terry, Dorothy Dene and Lillie Langtry made by G.F. Watts, Frederic Leighton and Edward Poynter considers the overlap between portraiture, history painting and mythological painting, interrogates the role of painter/sitter relations, and ultimately analyzes the commodification of actresses’ faces in the context of marketplace culture. Intriguingly, gender sometimes also intersected with national identity, as shown in Julie Lageyre’s essay, “Cent portraits de femmes des écoles anglaise et française (1909) : aspects d’une réception”, which examines how British portraits of women were assessed and (mis)understood by continental viewers, continental scholarship and historiography at the turn of the 20th century.

The 20th and 21st centuries have led to revisions of our understanding of the aesthetics, ethics and politics of portraiture, as well as of its relation to individuality or collective identity. Yet, old forms and motifs have proven surprisingly resilient. Liliane Louvel’s essay, “L’étrange héritage des conversation pieces chez Stanley Spencer : du XVIIIe au XXIe siècle”, explores the influence of the genre of the conversation piece in Stanley Spencer’s singular portraits from the 1920s to the late 1950s, comparing his works to those of George Romney. In the final article of the volume, “Portrayal or Betrayal? A Few Thoughts on Milton’s Curls”, Béatrice Laurent examines some of the challenges of portraiture in the digital age by investigating the dynamics of likeness/authenticity and betrayal/inauthenticity in the modernised internet portraits of the poet John Milton.

This introduction would be remiss if it were to conclude without acknowledging the three museums and the curatorial teams that made this publication possible. Indeed, the conference that gave rise to this issue was held in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, to accompany two exhibitions of British art organized by the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux in collaboration with the Musée du Louvre and the Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery: “British Stories: conversations entre le musée du Louvre et des Beaux-Arts” (May-September 2021) and “Absolutely Bizarre! Les drôles d’histoires de l’Ecole de Bristol 1800-1840” (June-October 2021). We are indebted to Guillaume Faroult, Senior Curator of 18th-Century Paintings and British and American Art at the Musée du Louvre, for putting us in touch with the Director of the Bordeaux Museum, Sophie Barthélémy, and Curator Sandra Buratti-Hasan. We are extremely grateful to the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Bordeaux for their financial and practical support and to the Bordeaux City Hall for hosting the event. We also wish to express our sincere thanks to Kate Newnham and Jenny Gaschke, Senior Curators at the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, for rich and lively exchanges during the conference.

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**NOTES**


2. Check https://www.musba-bordeaux.fr/node/1695

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