Face to Face: Portraits Through Time **at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry**

Martin Roberts

Collection: The Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry

In 2017 the Herbert staged an exhibition exploring the subject of portraiture. The key themes of this exhibition are explored in this article in more depth, questioning both what defines a portrait and how the relationship between the sitter, artist and intended audience influences the final work.

Keywords: portraiture, self-portrait, sitter, status, celebrity

The *Face to Face* exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum (3 February–4 June 2017) was an exploration of the history of portraiture from around 1500 to the present day (figs.1 and 2). The majority of the works in the exhibition were drawn from the Herbert's permanent collection. Founded after the Second World War, the Herbert has been actively collecting art since the 1950s. The key strand of collecting pursued by the gallery's first art director, John Hewitt, was in British Life and Landscape and this remains one of the main strengths of the collection today. It includes modern portraits by artists like Stanley Spencer, Ruskin Spear, Jacob Epstein, John Bratby and Joan Eardley. However, the city corporation has been collecting paintings since at least the sixteenth century, most of which are now part of the Herbert collection. These include many portraits of British kings and queens, local worthies and dignitaries. More recent collecting by the Herbert has diversified the collection to include portraits by Peter Howson, Vanley Burke, Nahem Shoa and Lisa Gunn, which depict ordinary people from a range of backgrounds.

Artworks from the Herbert's collection were further supplemented by loans of national and international significance from London-based collections including those of the National Portrait Gallery and the Courtauld Gallery. The Herbert had already developed a strong relationship with the Courtauld Gallery, through the loan of a number of works by Edgar Degas to the Herbert in 2016. This was part of the Courtauld Connects initiative in which the gallery loaned items to museums in towns and cities where the Courtauld family had established the successful business which had enabled Samuel Courtauld to form his world famous collection of art. These collaborations resulted in the loan of ten works for the exhibition from the collections of the National Portrait Gallery and three works from the Courtauld Gallery. Five works were also borrowed from the Arts Council Collection and one from Photo Archives Miners.

The exhibition focused on two key areas – what defines a portrait and how the relationship between the sitter, artist and intended audience influences the final work.

The exhibition began with an introduction to portraits, in which the question of what is a portrait was considered. Two contrasting works were displayed side by side; a portrait

believed to show Lady Elizabeth Fitzgerald from 1573 by Lucas de Heere (fig.3) and a 1980s painting by Peter Howson entitled *Man With Cigarette*. The sixteenth-century painting is very much what many people expect a portrait to be; an accurate likeness of the sitter, a rich and powerful member of the ruling classes, and almost certainly commissioned by the sitter or her family to demonstrate her wealth and status. By contrast, Howson's larger than life portrait shows the head and shoulders of a working class man smoking a cigarette and is exaggerated to the extent that it almost seems a caricature. In spite of this, the portrait captures the essence and spirit of the sitter, while conveying Howson's sympathy with his subject. It is as much an exploration of the human condition as a portrait of an individual. The juxtaposition of these two portraits exemplified many of the key points addressed in the overall theme of the exhibition.

Organised by a thematic rather than a chronological approach, the exhibition grouped works according to connections between them and the ways in which they related to one another. These ranged from themes that were quite obvious, such as self-portraits and portraits of children, to more conceptual themes encompassed by broad terms such as 'creative', 'fame' and 'status'. These groupings allowed us to display works from different periods and in very different styles side by side, creating some interesting comparisons and juxtapositions.

The first main section included works which were intended to highlight the status of the sitter. The portraits shown were all of local people – most of them were dignitaries, such as successful businessmen, landowners or politicians who had doubtless commissioned their portraits as a demonstration of their importance. The portrait of the young John Rotherham (fig.4), partner in the successful Coventry watchmaking firm of Rotherham and Sons, shows him with his horse in the kind of pose that was more usual for a member of the landowning nobility or gentry. However, in contrast, a pair of portraits from the 1880s was also included, showing a Coventry watchmaker and his wife, which would perhaps be best described as representations of the 'respectable working class'. The pair are depicted in dark plain clothes representing the couple as respectable, sober and hard working.

The theme of status is further developed later in the exhibition, focusing on people at the very top levels of society. This included royal portraits of Henry VIII, Queen Mary II and Princess Diana, as well as members of the aristocracy. Where royal portraits often functioned as extensions of power and authority, the aristocracy used portraits to demonstrate their wealth and status. The portrait of Mary II (fig.5) is a copy of Godfrey Kneller's full-length portrait of 1690. It was commissioned by the Coventry Corporation in 1691, along with a portrait of William III, at a cost of £10 for the pair. After many years hanging in the Guildhall it was in poor condition with much of the detail lost beneath a layer of dirt and discoloured varnish. Conservation of the painting for the exhibition has returned it to near its original state, enabling the details of Mary's dress and the symbols of royal authority (crown, orb and sceptre) to be seen for the first time in many years.

Family portraits formed another key grouping within the exhibition and included an eighteenth-century portrait of an upper-class family by a follower of Arthur Devis, lent by the Courtauld. This portrait illustrated how such portraits were used to emphasise the stability and continuity of the family line. The stiffness and formality of this portrait was contrasted with a portrait of 1838 showing the children of local landowner Arthur Gregory. The children, aged four and two, are shown playing with the family dog, demonstrating a more informal and sentimental side of family life.

Several portraits of children were exhibited, highlighting how artists have depicted childhood in different ways. A mid-nineteenth-century painting by Belgian artist Josef van Lerius shows a romantic portrait of a young boy. The wild outdoor setting represents the boy as a child of nature, while his long hair, disarranged clothing and thoughtful expression are suggestive of deeply felt emotions. By the twentieth century many artists adopted a more realistic view of childhood and began to be interested in showing people from working-class backgrounds who had not traditionally been the subject of formal portraits. The Herbert holds two paintings by Joan Eardley of children from the working-class area of Glasgow where she lived, one of which was included in the exhibition. It is a powerful character study, painted with great honesty and compassion and exposes the reality of child poverty in post-war Britain. John Bratby's drawing from 1961 shows the artist's son, Jason Bratby aged seventeen months. It is an unsentimental, true to life and not particularly flattering portrait of the child, perhaps reflecting some of the stresses and strains of parenthood.

The phenomenon of celebrity was also a focus of the exhibition, particularly the way that portraits have played their part in promoting well-known personalities to mass audiences. The sitters are often shown as they wish to be seen by the public. The first portrait in this section was a print of John Hoppner's painting of Admiral Nelson on loan from the National Portrait Gallery. Nelson was very aware of the importance of reputation and tried to heavily influence how he was depicted in the press. He was one of the most famous people of his day and his death at Trafalgar was greeted by a national outpouring of grief. The print was published on the day of his funeral, presumably in an attempt to cash in on demand for souvenirs. A photograph of The Beatles by Norman Parkinson also explored the concept of celebrity in an altogether different era and social context, taken in 1963 at the height of Beatlemania. The Beatles appear relaxed and in good humour and the portrait reinforces their image as ordinary, down to earth people who their fans could easily relate to. Michael Peto's photograph of Nelson Mandela was taken in June 1962, when Mandela visited England to gain support for the African National Congress' struggle against the apartheid policies of South Africa's ruling National Party. Mandela is represented as serious and statesmanlike. He is clearly utilising the opportunity to emphasise the importance of his mission and uses his image to gain support for his cause.

In the cases described above, the sitter is very much in control of the process of creating the portrait and the artist is being commissioned to produce an image which satisfies their requirements. By contrast, several sections of the exhibition showcased works where the artist was taking the initiative and setting the agenda for the final image. These included images of people outside of these positions of wealth and power, particularly depictions of people from poor or working-class backgrounds, people from minority groups and communities, and people who have suffered injustice or are in difficult circumstances. In many cases the artist is using the portrait to raise awareness of a social or political issue they feel strongly about – in others, working with an unknown sitter allows the artist more creative freedom to explore new approaches and techniques. These portraits are often fascinating character studies and show that the individuals represented are as worthy of attention as people from higher levels of society. They included portraits of working-class people by Ruskin Spear and Kenneth Long, both of whom felt a great deal of sympathy for the ordinary people they encountered in everyday life and wanted to capture and celebrate their character and individuality.

It was important to us to reflect cultural diversity in the exhibition, in terms of the representation of both artists and sitters. This included photographs by Vanley Burke taken around 2000 as part of a project to record African-Caribbean people in Coventry, and a painting by Nahem Shoa, entitled *Giant Head of Gbenga Illumoka* (fig.6). Shoa noticed that the only images of Black people displayed in most museums were historical depictions of slaves and servants. He set out to counteract this representation with portraits of contemporary Black British people which he has tried to place within museum collections in order to reflect diversity in a positive way.

A selection of self-portraits brought together a wide range of works illustrating how artists have used this form to explore aspects of their own character, personality and psychological state, as well as for a variety of more practical purposes. The self-portrait by Thomas Gainsborough, on loan from the National Portrait Gallery, was made in 1758–9, around the time he set up as a portrait painter in Bath, so he may have produced it as a demonstration of his skills with a view to attracting fashionable clients. In contrast, the self-portrait of Andy Warhol was part of a series made between 1965 and 1967, all based on the same photograph. Warhol tried to make himself appear as anonymous as possible, while still maintaining the strong likeness. In some cases, self-portraits are used to highlight an issue which the artist feels strongly about. In Sarah Lucas's *Self Portrait with Mug of Tea* (1993) she appears in a deliberately masculine pose. Wearing jeans, a t-shirt and heavy footwear, she sits with her legs wide apart. She presents herself as the epitome of tough and macho, yet still female, challenging stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality.

The exhibition also included artefacts from the museum's social history collection. Coins and medals from the Roman period to the twentieth century were displayed to illustrate how these have been used by rulers to spread their influence throughout their realm. The

displays also included a selection of woven silk pictures, or Stevengraphs, from the nineteenth century (fig.7). These items were pioneered by Thomas Stevens, a Coventry silk ribbon manufacturer, and sold for a relatively small amount of money, so they were instrumental in promoting prominent personalities, such as monarchs, politicians, soldiers, sportspeople, etc. They are an interesting record of the celebrities of the day, and featured the likes of Baden Powell, Lord Kitchener, jockey Fred Archer and cricketer WG Grace, as well as Gladstone and Disraeli. Cartes-de-visite from the Herbert's collection were displayed to show how photography helped to democratise the process of portraiture, enabling almost anyone to have their portrait taken for distribution to friends and family. An interesting feature of these portraits is the extent to which they mimic many of the conventions of traditional portrait painting including the poses of the sitters and the props and backdrops used.

The exhibition thus included a wide range of works, in terms of date, medium and approach, reflecting how portraiture is a product of the complex relationships between the motivations of the artist, sitter and intended audience.

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Images

Fig.1 General view of the Face to Face exhibition, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.2 General view of the Face to Face exhibition, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.3 Lucas de Heere, *Untitled – Believed to be Lady Elizabeth Firzgerald* (1573), oil on panel, 85 x 73 cm, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.4 David Gee, *John Rotherham with his Horse* (1832), oil on canvas, 107 x 133 cm, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.5 Installation shot, after Godfrey Kneller, *Queen Mary II* (1691), oil on canvas, 285 x 188 cm, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.6 Nahem Shoa, *Giant Head of Gbenga Illumoka* (2001), oil on canvas, 80 x 63 cm, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.7 Stevengraph, *Fred Archer* (1887-90), © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.8 The 'cabinet of curiosities' interactive, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.9 The stage set for the ‘put yourself in the portrait’ interactive, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.

Fig.10 The entrance to the exhibition showing the audio guide on the left, © Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.