

ENGLISH PORTRAITS

by

Clair Hughes

Annotated

by

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THE SIGN OF



A GOOD BOOK

EIHŌSHA

—Tokyo—

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Clair Hughes

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藤井治彦

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INTRODUCTION

“Once seen, never remembered,” said Oscar Wilde of the English face. If this is true, then perhaps it accounts for the existence of the uniquely British National Portrait Gallery in London—a strong urge to keep faces in the national memory. Indeed, the declared purpose of the foundation of this gallery 5 was historical, educational and even sentimental rather than as a repository of great art. On the occasion of voting funds in Parliament for its foundation in 1856, the politician, Palmerston, declared “there cannot be a greater incentive to mental exertion, to noble actions, to good conduct on the part of the living than 10 for them to see before them the features of those who have done things which are worthy of our admiration and whose example we are more induced to imitate when they are brought before us in the visible and tangible shape of portraits.”

Yet the British are on the whole diffident about art. They 15 have wonderful collections of it, but they have, as Henry James said, “the genuine British mistrust of the bothersome principle.” That is, of art as a proper pursuit and a serious profession. But in portrait painting they have excelled, seeing in it a commemorative and descriptive function, rather than an art existing simply 20 for its own sake—less of the ‘bothersome principle’ and closer to the art of literature, which they have never found bothersome. There is certainly an affinity between these two art forms in

Britain. It was the Frenchman, Baudelaire, who first wrote about paintings in terms of music; but it could only have been an Englishman who said, as Hogarth did, that his paintings were plays, and his men and women dramatic characters. He hoped, 5 like Palmerston, that his work—including portraits—would be uplifting, educational and useful.

The intention of this short survey of English portrait-painting is to provide those more familiar with the literature of England with some kind of visual background against which to set their 10 knowledge of literature and history; and in some cases, I hope, to illumine that knowledge with new information or a fresh viewpoint. Less pragmatically, I would hope that interest may be awakened in the paintings for their own sakes, as works of art which form an important part of the history of Western Art.

THE PORTRAIT PAINTER

The portrait painter's status and position in society has always been ambivalent. That usefulness, which has already been mentioned, is also dangerous. A portrait is a bargain between sitter and artist; the artist is paid to record a subject. But the difference between this and the recording of the appearance of an apple 5 in a still-life, is that the apple cannot argue back. There is also the third element of the spectator who can accuse the artist of either flattery or malice. Hence the poor portrait-painter has often been considered little better than a hair-dresser or beautician—paid to flatter his client. The great French painter, Boucher 10 remarked to a beautiful lady he was painting, that he could never hope to reproduce the fine colours of her face; "Why not?" she said, "we buy our paints from the same shop." But on the other hand, the portrait-painter has been the most highly rewarded of artists; the world's most famous painting is a portrait— 15 *The Mona Lisa*.

The portrait-painter himself has not always been at ease with his profession. "A Face to paint, for Bread," grumbled Thomas Gainsborough, and like many other portrait painters, felt he could be more respectably employed. In Gainsborough's case 20 he preferred to be playing his viol-da-gamba in the countryside. Or so he said; a romantic rather than a realistic wish, one feels, since he earned very comfortable bread and butter from his

portraits. Even now an art student will rarely own to an ambition to practise portraiture—the idea lacks nobility and smacks of sale and hire. Portraiture is art with work to do; this is the source of its uneasy relationship with the wider field of art generally.

5 This sometimes despised usefulness lies in portraiture’s ability to give permanent form to the essentially impermanent human face. To confer this kind of immortality, what matters intensely at the time of painting, is ‘likeness.’ This is a concept endlessly at issue in portrait-painting. Close likeness is in fact far from

10 important finally, for *real* immortality. We don’t know, nor do we really care how the real Signora Lisa Gioconda or Mrs. Saskia Rembrandt looked, precisely. Our real interest lies in our instinctive recognition of the truth of the painter’s account of a living individual. This truth encompasses his personality,

15 his particular appearance at a given time and place, as well as the infinite possibilities of his spiritual and intellectual life. Our feelings must in some way be moved by the recognition of these qualities.

THE PORTRAITS

I

Despite its ability to confer immortality, portraiture was virtually unknown in Europe between the 5th and 13th centuries, A.D. Art during these centuries was either *applied* art—for example, manuscript illustration, metalwork and embroidery—or purely religious; that is, highly formalised, rigidly controlled 5 and unrealistic. For these early artists the soul was more important than the body and the physical differences between one body and another were of no interest. Portraiture requires some degree of interest in physical characteristics (that is, realism) to flourish. One must of course bear in mind that the sculpted portraits of 10 the classical past survived, and that European coinage—based on this classical sculpture—constituted a continuing form of applied portraiture. The history of portrait sculpture is, however, another story, though clearly a related one.

By the end of the 13th century elements of painted portraiture 15 were discernible in two of these early art forms—the religious wall-paintings of the churches of Southern Europe, and the manuscript illustration of the North. It became the custom for prominent citizens of, say Florence, to pay an artist to execute a religious wall-painting (fresco) for one of his city's churches. 20 A pardonable wish to remind God and his fellow-citizens of his



1. ANON., *The Wilton Diptych* (National Gallery, London)

(the donor's) large financial outlay on this decoration, led the donor to require the artist to include himself, his wife and then eventually children, servants, horses, houses and pets in the painting. An example of this is found in the frescoes of the Chapel of the Medici Palace in Florence, where the religious content is almost swamped by the teeming crowd of Medicis and their friends. As well as advertising the donor's identity, status and wealth, this kind of painting also acted as an insurance policy for the hereafter; there was much reassurance to be had out of seeing oneself depicted amongst saints and angels. Similarly, inclusion among God's holy words, and images of the holy family and saints, in the illustrated Bibles and prayer-books, gave permanent expression to one's earthly wealth and heavenly hopes.

English kings were, until the 17th century, considered semi-divine, God's earthly representatives, and were therefore most often painted within this kind of context. Added to this was the ritual importance of a dead king's effigy. This was particularly important in tomb-sculpture, where the representation of the dead king's face had to be reasonably recognisable, as evidence that he really was dead. The element of effigy—of portraiture as a memorial—is particularly important in early English portrait-painting.

The face of King Richard II is the first royal face with which we are fairly familiar. Not only do we have a tomb-effigy, but he is also shown in what is the first major English portrait—the *Wilton Diptych* [1]. It was probably painted around 1400, or at least within living memory of the King. The tomb-effigy in

Westminster Abbey confirms the individuality of the Diptych, which is a small, folding two-panelled work designed for devotional rather than ornamental purposes. It shows King Richard being introduced to the Madonna and Child by his two English
5 sponsor-saints, Edmund the Martyr and Edward the Confessor, as well as St. John the Baptist. The artist is not known, but judging by the style of the work, he is more likely to have been French or Flemish than English.

The obvious question one asks is: how far is this like Richard?
10 We have the tomb-effigy to confirm the likeness, but one must consider the possibility that both painting and sculpture shared the current conventions for representing the human face, and that the other faces in the Diptych are not so very different from Richard's. One could say that the Wilton portrait is credible but
15 not that it is realistic or lively. Essentially the image is concerned with the symbols and outward appearance of kingship. Richard's own emblem of the White Hart, his crown and the broom-pods of the Plantagenets are all included in the picture and are insisted upon, as are his divinity and his relationship with the holiest of
20 his ancestors. Nevertheless, one can't help feeling there is an individuality in that distinctively tilted nose and the handsome though rather weakly feminine face. The face somehow fits the personality that emerges from history and from the vivid portrait we have of him in Shakespeare's play, *Richard II*.

25 There is something of Chaucer's 'parfit, gentil knyght' in the *Wilton Diptych* but there is even more of the Squire:

Embrouded was he, as it were a mede

Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and rede.
Singing he was, or floytinge, al the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.

(Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. c. 1390)

The interest in small, bright details, the elegance, youth and 5
charm of the description is comparable to the image of the
Diptych. Even the jewelled, enamelled quality of the painting
has a similar feel to the brightly embroidered appearance of the
Squire, though there is no great interest in the details of his
face. This rich, gilded jewel-like quality of the Diptych as an 10
object, the highly formalised style combined with the realistic
detailing of textiles and surfaces, point to an artist used to work-
ing with the illustrated manuscripts of Northern Europe.

II

However lovely an object and however much one feels that
it brings to life a figure from history, the *Wilton Diptych* has still 15
a long way to go to reach the standards in portraiture of contem-
porary Italy and the Low Countries. England in the 15th century
was an uncertain and politically unstable country. The visual
arts were as yet immature. Compared to Italy, for example,
England was materially poor and its great men were more con- 20
cerned with the struggle for power than with consideration of the
arts. But with the establishment of a strong Tudor dynasty under
Henry VII in the last decades of the 15th century, the country
began to be at peace and to prosper.

Henry VII was not himself a lavish patron of the arts, but 25
he put enough money in the royal coffers to allow his son, Henry



2. HOLBEIN, *Henry VIII* (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

VIII, to establish himself as a great Renaissance prince and a lover of the arts. The visual arts served not simply as a demonstration of Henry's education and taste, but also as a permanent record of himself as King, his power, his achievements and his court. His face in countless replicas is one of the most familiar in English history, and we owe this familiarity largely to the genius of Hans Holbein. Henry brought Holbein to England from Ger-