





TRUE LIKENESS

There is nothing like a portrait to capture the essence of a person. **Harriet Griffey** charts the rising popularity of portraiture, and our enduring fascination with faces

We come into the world wide-eyed, ready to stare,” historian and art critic Simon Schama pronounces in the BBC series *Face of Britain*. Science tells us we love looking at faces. Babies less than an hour old will tend to focus on face-like images longer than any other pattern, and by the time they are four months old their brains are processing faces at nearly adult levels. Psychological research suggests this is associated with the reward centre of the brain, where the release of dopamine in response to visual stimulation is associated with pleasure and the power of the human face – all of which may explain why paintings, from da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* to the society portraits of John Singer Sargent, continue to excite us.

This sense of wonder is writ large at the National Portrait Gallery, which has just secured £9.4 million lottery funding to transform its galleries, and contains over 11,000 portraits. “Encountering a great portrait gives a sense of coming face to face with a real individual,” says the gallery’s director, Dr Nicholas Cullinan. “And it is more than just a likeness; the artist’s skill creates the connection to the viewer. The BP Portrait Award is one of our most popular exhibitions, attracting large >>

LABOUR OF LOVE **Left:** Phoebe Dickinson paints the Marchioness of Cholmondeley (formerly Rose Hanbury) at her home, Houghton Hall in Norfolk

PHOTOGRAPH: HARRY CORY WRIGHT



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numbers of visitors each year – well over 300,000 in 2019. Our annual competitions directly encourage the work of talented artists and show portraiture as a living genre, connecting the Collection to the present and providing a platform for emerging and established portrait artists.”

Tai Shan Schierenberg was one such winner of the Portrait Award in 1989, going on to be extensively commissioned, painting the portraits of both Sir John Mortimer QC and poet Seamus Heaney. Portraiture is about depicting likeness, he says, but it's also more than that. “It's important to understand the geography of the face,” he explains. “Some aspects of anatomy are more important to the likeness than others. The skill of a portrait is not just in its likeness, though: it's also in finding a painting style that allows the reality of the person to come through in a way that is believable. And there's the skill of composition to consider. Although I work from the person – the sitter – I also use photos and make oil sketches to create the general set-up.”

Schierenberg is also one of the judges of Sky's Portrait Artist of the Year, of which one past participant is Phoebe Dickinson, winner of this year's prestigious Burke's Peerage Foundation Award for classically inspired portraiture, with her portrait of 'Rose at Houghton'. “Featuring in the Sky programme was hard,” she remembers, “as you only have four hours to paint the portrait. My aim is always to create a portrait that's also of interest to those who don't know the person. I'm interested in the narrative of a painting – and feel that it should be an interesting painting as well as a good portrait. I have been inspired by the painter John Singer Sargent, whose painting *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* is a favourite.”

Annabel Elton, whose job at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters is to assist with commissions, says she has definitely seen a rise in interest in portraiture, >>

BEST FACE FORWARD Above: Dame Elish Angiolini by Mark Roscoe, winner of the 2013 Ondaatje Prize, portraiture's most prestigious honour Top: John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* is one painting that has inspired Dickinson's style





as well as in ideas about what makes a fashionable portrait. “My role is very much to help people to find the right painter for their portrait. A commission is often to do with seeking something that’s not ephemeral, trying to anchor love in legacy. Often it will be a gift for a major birthday or an anniversary, or done to commemorate something else special. For these sorts of occasions, photography isn’t always enough. A portrait is more enduring as a piece of art, so it’s a bigger decision. In a painted portrait, you have a little bit of the soul of the artist as well as the soul of the subject; a really good portrait will talk about the human condition; it will have another layer.”

Mark Roscoe, who won the Royal Society’s most prestigious honour, the Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture, in 2013 has been commissioned extensively. “Most of my commissions come via word of mouth, or someone has seen my work. The way I work is with a few informal sittings where we chat, experiment with a few different

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poses and backgrounds, and I take some photographs. Together, we select the best images and try to work out the right composition for the size of canvas. I do most of the work back in my studio and will send some images when it’s nearing completion, asking for advice on the finishing touches. A portrait has to reveal the sitter’s personality; it should be unique to them. For me, Rembrandt’s self-portrait at Kenwood House is one of the very best examples of portraiture that I can think of.” ■

For help in finding an artist to commission, contact Annabel Elton at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters via therp.co.uk. Also visit taishanschierenberg.com; phoebedickinson.com

STILL LIVES **Left:** The Cholmondeley children at Houghton Hall **Above:** Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney by Tai Shan Schierenberg, the 1989 winner of the BP Portrait Award