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CHAPTER ONE

A Portrait or Not?

Let's begin with a question: How does the introduction of writing onto a portrait further its aims, and how does it disrupt them? From such a question proceeds a host of other questions, and the purpose of this book is to engage in detail with many of them, but for the time being, it is only fair to make some brief answers to the first question. We cannot very well proceed without at least positing a few provisional and tentative answers, simply to get our bearings.

For one thing, in proffering readings of the images in portraits, writing ratifies identity, preserving likeness from anonymity once the image can no longer be recognized by personal witness. But the claims of writing are rhetorical; they are freighted with ideology and can be set to religious, political, or bureaucratic purposes and abuses. On a good day, they may hold true, with aesthetic wonder or penetrating insight.

In some cases, writing provides a direct testimony of the sitter in his or her own hand. This makes an indexical link to the sitter or writer. In this way, the physical substance of the writing on a portrait supports perceived, if sometimes illusory, qualities of the image. Such a material connection may play across a spectrum of performances that run from the exhibition of "self" in the mastery of calligraphic technique to the assertion of ownership or

creatorship (as with a signature), or perhaps simply to captioning, but it entails, as well, a vulnerability to deception and counterfeit. Writing, then, situates a portrait in a historical and cultural context, and in combination with an image and the material means by which the image came into being, it provides an opening for a thicker description.

And as for the disruptions in our question, they might be spatial: in European painting since at least the fourteenth century, writing on the surface of a painting threatened to disrupt a hard-won illusion of three-dimensionality, so, generally, writing had to be introduced surreptitiously into the scene, on a letter with a legible signature or salutation, say, or in utterances seemingly painted upon a wall, or in inscriptions, carved *trompe l'oeil*, into furniture or window frames.

In other contexts, where writing can be fitted seamlessly into a space that was conceived as an integral part the portrait, conventional forms can be appropriated for alien content. Such disruptions are particularly apparent with ancient Egyptian images, where the space created for an initial inscription could be relatively easily taken down a few millimeters and reinscribed to different ends. This puts an impostor's voice into the mouth of the sitter and falsifies the relation between image and text, rebranding it for someone else's purposes, far off, in another time and place, as we will see.

Writing is ever the supplement to an image, giving it a voice or commenting upon it and bringing the dialectical complexity of supplementarity into the portrait, so that the writing becomes indispensable to the image, even as it undoes it in certain ways. In East Asia, this doubleness was strengthened by the very close material relation between word and image: the same materials and same vocabulary of strokes that wrote the characters or graphs of a text could be used to create the image proper.¹ For all the deconstructive complexity this entails, it is still a two-way process, so that even commonplace commercial reproductions in our modern world can be flipped, via an inscription, to make possible uniquely individual expression.

Writing may mislead in conjuring up the illusion of closure for an image, whereas it actually further diversifies and complicates the significance of the portrait. This stems from the perennial struggle between vision and speech as our most durable tools for communication. “A picture is worth a thousand words,” as the old saw has it, but one word can spawn a thousand pictures, as well, or find itself enmeshed in a thousand or more (con)texts, so even though the seeming transparency of an image can tantalize the imagination, it frustrates the desire for definitive meaning, as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset discovered through his long engagements with Velázquez and Goya. Might it not be that the fascination of portraiture comes from this very inscrutability?

It’s worth pointing out that this challenge to our desire for definition, for a stable ground for understanding, ramifies into not only the relation between image and text, but into the varying technologies by which speech is constructed into writing. The putatively phonetic systems based on the Greco-Latin alphabet contrast starkly in their graphic simplicity of twenty-odd letters with the ideographic systems of, for instance, Egyptian or Chinese, in which the signs used in writing are not used primarily or exclusively to express sound,² and this, too, has consequences for the way writing and image interact in a portrait, as we will see in the following chapters.

Despite these differences, however, something about portraiture transcends such diversity, making it the most far-reaching of artistic genres. Although portraits cannot be found in all the cultures of the world, they find prominence in times and places unconnected one to another, even while preserving a commitment to certain basic characteristics, likeness being the most important of all. They also conjure the illusion that the portrait image has a real and discernible relation to the character of the subject of the portrait.

These are problems we will explore more fully here, and we will proceed from there in subsequent chapters to engage with pharaohs’ portraits from the nineteenth century BCE in Egypt, to

abbots' portraits in Zen monasteries of medieval China and Japan, to portraits of dwarfs and court jesters created by Velázquez in seventeenth-century Spain, and eventually to some of the last portraits Andy Warhol made in the mid-1980s.

A Portrait, or Not?

The subtitle of this book, *Writing on Portraits*, might be misleading. The little word “on,” meaning “about” or “with regard to,” in “writing *on* portraits” points to a common genre of art criticism and art history, to scholarship and criticism about portraiture. This, however, is not primarily that kind of book; it is less a book about art criticism or art history than about how meaning is made, about semiotics. I intend the “on” of writing *on* portraits in, first of all, a material sense. Such writing on portraits is resident with the portrait image itself. It is also writing *on* portraits in a figural sense, elaborating an image, say, or extending its meaning in a metaphorical or metonymic sense, or by giving the image a voice. This latter type of writing *on* portraits is rooted in the very idea of the portrait, in its identity as a portrait, rather than some other kind of representation. Thus, the reading to which you are invited here is about the presence of writing (up)on or within portraits, how writing captions or equivocates, how it impinges upon the portrait, even in performing it.

You might say, what of likeness and what of “character” as revealed in a fine portrait? And you would be right to ask, in part at least: there is a need for clarification. Portrait images do indeed inhere in likeness, in an affinity of visual resemblance, but when “portraiture” intends the representation of specific individuals via likeness, likeness must be afforded a range of meaning. It does imply a visually recognizable relationship, an iconicity or resemblance, between the individual represented (the sitter or subject) and a consciously crafted image of said person. It’s easy to affirm an urge to replicate an individual just as we see them. “Seeing” is the most wide-ranging way to engage someone else. (“Feeling,” “smelling,”

or “tasting” the person would entail a snarl of complications; and if “hearing” them is less fraught, it is also more directly freighted with the exertion of power: “I hear and obey.”)

In seeing a portrait of someone we know, a yearbook photo, say, or a much-liked social-media posting, we recognize a fellow, indeed, we “re-cognize” them, we know them anew, recalling past knowledge and perhaps emotion, as well. In recognizing the person, we aspire to discern in them a particularly characteristic look, something that makes their identity transparent or eloquent or moving.

But what happens when the subject in question and others who knew that subject pass away? This “first-order likeness” may be irrecoverable, yet a kind of likeness still remains, especially for people of prominent social or political stature, persons well represented in the cultural memory. With this “second-order likeness,” the visual relationship between subject and portrait may become secondary to cultural conventions and presumptions about “how the subject looked” and how they should be represented. The subject has a *look* that the portraitist aims to capture. Notice how the very word “looked” — whether we read the verb as active or passive — affords the subject a type of agency, even while we are looking at them. This kind of likeness may still partake of some of the iconicity of the first kind of likeness, but it is also subject to aesthetic, rhetorical, religious, political, and other types of manipulation.

The conviction that there is still something *true* about a good portrait is ubiquitous, but so is the suspicion that likeness may be unreliable or precarious. “In whose eyes is it true?” needs to be asked. Is the image one the subject themselves proposes? Is it the vision of an artist, or the privilege of an intimate, or merely the trace of an official transaction?

Likeness

There is an etymological relation between “likeness” and the verb “to like.” But this link calls into question whatever it may hope to explain, for if things in the world bear their true likeness, that is, if

they actually look like what they are, then it may be very difficult to “like” certain of them. But perhaps that puts too much weight on affect in the word “like.” Maybe what we intend to “like” is less a matter of “loving” or “feeling enthusiastic about” than merely acquiescence to the sufficiency of likeness: yes, *that* IS what X is like. All the same, given the mediation of aesthetics, don’t we feel far more than mere sufficiency in liking the likeness of a portrait? Don’t we feel, rather, as if something precious and wonderful is there, that someone not physically present in their (now no longer) living being nonetheless *lives* on a canvas or in an image of stone or clay?

We submit mundanely to the creation of images of ourselves in which the “looks like” sense of likeness is a forensic or bureaucratic priority, as with driver’s licenses and passport photos. (Interesting, isn’t it, that we have a predisposition to think that such images “don’t *really* look like me!”) Such a sense of likeness has become ubiquitous in our world, through photography and media, by means of increasingly refined technologies for producing images, with increasingly elaborate methods to mine them and a deepening vulnerability to misappropriation; all this is, in turn, pimped by celebrity, pumped by the twenty-four-hour “news” cycle, primed by a smorgasbord of cosmetics, tonsorial regimens, and methods to disguise “unlike(d)” elements of personal topography.

Since both the iconic likeness of the subject to a portrait and the ability to recognize such a likeness from personal experience are subject to mortality, likeness of this sort is always in the process of disappearing. How many “portraits” of unknown subjects that hold honored places in our visual canon can we no longer identify? How many are outright cases of mistaken identity?

Consider, for example, two of the most renowned dynasts of medieval Japan, Minamoto Yoritomo and Ashikaga Takauji.³ For decades, they were thought to be the subjects of two similarly renowned portraits. The one showed the sensitively executed face of a particular man as the focus of an image otherwise encased from all directions in the angular black carapace of medieval Japanese

court robes. As Yoritomo's portrait, this would represent the remote and ruthless general who founded the Kamakura Shogunate (ca. 1192–1333 CE) as a handsome man, serious, but still young (fig. 1.1). His costume and the disposition of the body it conceals come from the centuries-old sumptuary conventions of the Japanese royal court and acknowledge cultural allegiance to it, even though he was a prime mover in overthrowing the ancestral political power of that order.

The other portrait was thought to represent Ashikaga Takauji, the first warlord of the Muromachi Shogunate (ca. 1333–1585 CE). The face in this portrait is more generic, but the subject's body, clad in crimson samurai body armor and mounted on a beautifully executed black stallion in matching armor, enhances the visual interest of the face (fig. 1.2).

As recently as 1971, these portraits were identified as Yoritomo and Takauji⁴ in a prestigious anthology of traditional Japanese art⁵ and were used in textbooks, newspapers, and exhibitions as icons of the two warlords. Research of the past several decades has dismissed both identifications.⁶ All the same, these images have shaped the cultural memory of the celebrated generals to such a degree that it is difficult to disentangle their iconicity from the errors of connoisseurship that led to the misattributions.

In contexts less clearly erroneous, too, we must recognize that even the images that we identify as true or serious and creditable representations of important personages from the past may not give us an accurate picture of what they “actually” would have looked like to our own naked eyes. A cascade of complications comes from this realization: First of all, how would we ever find ourselves in a situation to look upon such an exalted person anyway? What would be required of us as viewers, what sort of fantasy would need to hold sway in the real world for such an experience to come into our lives?

When we say “actually” here, moreover, the word becomes polyglot, because it means both “phenomenally,” in the English sense relating genuine empirical experience (I *actually* saw her), even as



Figure 1.1 Portrait reputed to be of Minamoto Yoritomo. Jingo Temple, Kyoto.



Figure 1.2 Mounted warrior, previously reputed to be a portrait of Ashikaga Takauji, now thought more likely to be of Kōno Moronao. Kyoto National Museum.

it also means “contemporaneously” or “at present,” as in *actuellement* or *actualmente* in French or Spanish. The distinction is instructive: for us to make our own individual judgments about that likeness, to experience it *actuellement*, we would have to travel in time. But actually, without fulfilling that condition, we still insist on likeness when we see portraits of people we can identify. What basis are we using to make such judgments? It must be about another form of “likeness.”

This, we will call “second-order likeness,” and we will abbreviate as likeness B, distinguishing it from likeness A, for the empirically observable “first-order likeness” of an image to a living subject. Likeness B allows us to see the way an image has been recognized within a culture and to observe that it works with a different valence from likeness A. The two need not be mutually exclusive. Photography has given us a telling parallax here. We cannot now know what Lincoln looked like *actualmente*, but we can recognize his image in an abundance of photographs, drawings, paintings, caricatures, and even film, video, and new-media representations. These are all “portraits” of various types, and although their subject is gone, his likeness B persists, with, in fact, an actual material or indexical relation to the long-dead president, based on the action of light on photographic emulsion.

At this point, the rhetoric of “character” often becomes attached to likenesses. Consider, for example, the following account of a portrait reputed to be of Caterina Cornaro (1454–1510), the much-abused Greco-Venetian “Queen of Cyprus, Jerusalem and Armenia”:

the finest portrait we have of the young Caterina was painted some thirty years after her death by Titian, who almost certainly drew on at least one contemporary portrait, and possibly some lost drawings made from life. The image he conveys of her is striking indeed, a portrayal of character worthy of his imaginative genius. What we see is the portrait of a young, powerfully built woman, her robust proportions cunningly softened by her sidelong stance. She is dressed in a ruby-red, velveteen gown, worn beneath a sumptuously embroidered overgarment, whose long open-front collar consists of

two twin lines of pearls on gold. On her head, she wears a golden coronet, studded with jewels and tipped with pearls. Her hair, modestly drawn back under a diaphanous veil, apart from the formal ringlets of red hair that hang over her forehead, from beneath her coronet. Yet, none of this magnificence is allowed to distract from the exceptional clarity of her features and overall expression. Caterina was not beautiful. Her features appear unblemished, yet distinctly plain. But it is her sideways glance, gazing directly out of the picture, that is most revealing. Her expression is wary, uncertain almost, yet somehow manages to convey an inner strength that sits well with her powerful build. Mutely she is expressing the apprehensive feelings that must have been experienced by so many brides of the time and of years to come. She is at once demure and determined. Here is a brave young woman of sufficient character not to be cowed by the absolutely unknown future that awaits her. And what a future this would prove to be.⁷

This is the hook for the fascinating and tragic tale Paul Strathern tells of Caterina in his book *The Venetians*. With recourse to the internet, it isn't hard to find the image he refers to, but it isn't a Titian.⁸ And what if it isn't even an image of Caterina Cornaro? There's no good evidence to prove that it is. In fact, a painting of her, now in Budapest, for which identity and attribution (to Gentile Bellini) are much more reliable, bears little likeness to the woman in the putative Titian. There are problems of connoisseurship and capital at stake here, of course, but those are not of immediate relevance for us. It is rather the question of what likeness B might mean when likeness A is thrown into serious doubt. Is there, then, any significance to considering likeness at all?

First, it is important to realize that the supposed Titian was held to be Caterina for a long while: an eighteenth-century engraving by Samuele Levi is closely based on it, and although the sumptuous clothing Levi's subject wears differs in some details from those in the painting, the physiognomy is close. A further complication appears in that "Caterina" is depicted — implicitly in the pseudo-Titian and explicitly in the Levi — in the likeness of her patron

saint, Catherine of Alexandria: in the engraving, one can even make out through a window in the background three steep little pyramids as attributes of Catherine, in the way pyramids were imagined in early modern Europe (fig. 1.3).

Yet another image, supposedly of Caterina, a seventeenth-century oil on canvas, can be seen in Nicosia. In this case, the costume has been radically simplified, but the facial features remain strikingly close to the Uffizi painting. So even if the painting is not by Titian and not contemporary with Caterina at the age at which she is depicted, a kind of likeness remains. What is important about this likeness is the place it holds as a public image of the Venetian heroine. Her home had been in Cyprus, but control of the island was contested among the Republic of Venice, the Kingdom of Savoy, and the Mamluk rulers of the Ottoman Empire. As the result of a succession dispute, she became queen of Cyprus, at fourteen, but for most of her tragic life, she remained a pawn in the struggles of those powers. Whether she “actually” looked like the image in the supposed Titian, the Levi engraving, or its descendent in Nicosia is beside the point. It is here, too, that we are urged to find a link between this image and the supposed features of her “character” that emerge from the complicated story of her life, with all its romance, its tribulations, its redemptions and, ultimately, its mysteries . . . and that seem so satisfying to find in the “portrait” of her.

But if we provisionally consider “Titian’s *Caterina*” to be a portrait by virtue of its likeness B to other images of her, we gain insights even into portraits of much stabler identity and clearer attribution. We can then observe how, whatever fidelity there may be to likeness A, in the case of likeness B, the image of the supposed sitter must be analyzed for its visual rhetoric, its social, political, and aesthetic purposes and its market.

This set of concerns may afford other insights into what constitutes a portrait. What about an “imaginary portrait,” for instance? In one grand example, Diego de Silva y Velázquez (1599–1660) paints the philosopher Aesop, a figure whose historical substance



Figure 1.3 Samuele Levi, *Caterina Cornaro Regina di Cipro*, after a painting attributed to Titian. Harvard University Museums/Fogg Museum, accession no. G2356, gift of William Gray from the collection of Francis Calley Gray.
© President and Fellows of Harvard College.

is difficult to recover from beneath the thick varnish of legend that has crusted it over, but a historical Aesop may have lived in the late seventh century BCE. How could such a person's portrait possibly be painted two thousand years later? (See plate 1.1.)

Velázquez names his image of Aesop with a caption identifying him, as he does certain other figures, some of which, at least, he definitely considered portraits.⁹ Yet Velázquez scholar Jonathan Brown states unequivocally, *Aesop* "is by no means a portrait, but rather an amalgam of visual and literary sources successfully disguised under a veneer of realism."¹⁰

The terms of Brown's rejection are important: as an amalgam, *Aesop* is supposed to lack coherence and unity as a visual subject; a real person is supposed to possess such an authentic unity, but according to Brown, Velázquez has, rather, imposed a realistic veneer on an otherwise incoherent amalgam. Brown asserts this to be the case because of the subject's shapeless costume, his "cow-like" face (which, he demonstrates, was derived from physiognomic prints of the late sixteenth century), and a classification of the figure into the "phlegmatic type," with relaxed posture, one hand tucked into his robe. This is all reasonable, but the image is nonetheless routinely listed and *read* as a portrait of Aesop in numerous exhibition catalogs and scholarly studies.¹¹

If this discrepancy has any interest beyond semantic *préciosité*, then it would encourage us to consider portraits from a different point of view, to see whether this painting does not indeed have various characteristics of an "authentic" portrait. To do so, it becomes necessary to look not only at the face and the clothing of the subject, but also the other items pictured with him on the canvas. Most prominent is a bucket with a strip of leather hanging over the side. Brown and others have linked this object to an episode of the *Aesop Romance*¹² in which a man relocates his house next to a tannery. At first, he finds the stench utterly noxious, but as he becomes accustomed to it, his stoicism pays off, and he becomes no longer bothered by it. Such an interpretation seems plausible, but it

leaves the viewer wondering why the subject of the painting should have such a penetrating and disquieting gaze. If he no longer cares about the smell, why is he looking at us *that* way?

There may be an answer in another take on the iconography of the painting. Nicholas Tromans proposes that it relates not to a stoic tale about tanning, but rather to a story more cynical, and scatological: Aesop's first master, Xanthus, professed himself a philosopher, but under him, Aesop was subjected to various indignities. Once, when Aesop was assisting his master at the latrine to help him wash his backside, the master inquired why people were inclined to have a look, after they'd shat, at what they'd rid themselves of, there in the toilet. Aesop replied, "they just want to make sure that they haven't unintentionally excreted some of their brains as well." Then Aesop added that Xanthus need have no such worries, in that he couldn't lose what he hadn't possessed in the first place.

This almost seems like a stand-up routine: the witty slave indulges his master's squalid curiosity with unblinking clarity, but adds a surly aside that puts the master in his place. What a strange image and story for Velázquez' royal patron, Philip IV! The painting was likely created for the Torre de la Parada, the king's hunting lodge, where his majesty went to relax with his male entourage outside the stifling confines of the palace in Madrid.¹³ Like the jesters and dwarfs (also pictured on the walls there), these philosophers served as a foil to the royals. Perhaps even the lugubrious Philip managed a chuckle there in his hunting lodge, where he wasn't pinioned by palace decorum.¹⁴

The intersection between the story of Aesop and Xanthus and the image on the canvas finds its most expressive motive in Aesop's gaze. He is present to us as viewers just after he has delivered his quip and we are witnesses to his wit and incisive critical awareness. His gaze makes us over into Xanthus temporarily and on further reflection into more self-aware individuals. For in portraiture, "the eyes have it," as counseled the early medieval Chinese painter and critic Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344–406).¹⁵

The artistic program of the Torre de la Parada hunting lodge may tantalize our curiosity about the world of the seventeenth-century Spanish court, but that is peripheral to our concern. What the “portrait” of Aesop offers us, more importantly, is some latitude for reconsidering what is and what is not a portrait. If likeness B can be detached from the actual physiognomy of a once living subject, perhaps it can at least provisionally be detached from an actual person altogether.¹⁶ This would seem particularly advantageous with portraits that establish a clear visual engagement with their viewers.

It would be judicious to qualify such portraits as “imaginary,” but in persisting to assert that they nonetheless remain “portraits,” we open our perspective to a kind of likeness that is distinct from likeness A and likeness B. This third kind of likeness, likeness C, is not about physical resemblance at all, but rather about a likeness in consciousness, the illusion that in viewing a portrait, we are looking at a real person, someone who can look back at us, with opinions of their own and an individual point of view. We see such a likeness C at work in the portrait of Aesop, for what gives the image its force is not just the extraordinary physiognomy and unusual posture. It is also the gaze, without which an account of the dialogue with Xanthus would not be accessible.

We will have further occasion to elaborate on all three types of likeness in due course, but what happens when likeness per se is not enough? What, in such a case, is *not* a portrait? Consider a death mask. There is certainly likeness A in such an object — it is, after all, a point-for-point replica of the actual face of a person; yet a death mask is not a portrait, even though such masks have sometimes been used as models for portraits. Partly this must have to do with the fact that the subject is dead, with eyes closed. Their flesh is likely gone slack, or worse, their features gone rigid in rigor mortis, with none of the vital muscular tension that held their living expression in place. And this holds true for life masks, similarly, because the creation of such objects imposes a static expressionlessness on the subject under the mold matrix while it sets.

More important though, life masks and death masks are not representations of subjects in the same way painting and sculpture are. There is no “artist” or “craftsperson,” no sense of a creative consciousness (whether identifiable or anonymous) at work in fashioning the image. A good deal of skill may be required to produce a high-quality death mask, but the maker’s intent is different, and the technical skill required for the painting or sculpture is far more exacting than that required for even a virtuoso death mask.

With a portrait, the intent of the maker in bringing likeness into representation is crucial, even in cases where we cannot identify the maker. With the death mask, “representation” is of a vague character. What is sought is instead an indexical relation between the subject and the mask: the mask is created by being in direct physical contact with the subject. There are some cases, as we will see, where indexicality is part of a portrait, too, but in these cases, the indexicality is supplementary to the image. It doesn’t control it completely, as with a death mask.

Other kinds of masks are also worth mentioning here, masks that bear no indexical relation to a known subject. Wonderful masks were created for the art of noh drama, for example. Most of them represent human beings, but they are not portraits. Such masks are used interchangeably within a given range of the performance canons of noh, such that, say, the *zō-onna* mask, a mask of a beautiful and elegant woman in her twenties, is used for the portrayal of goddesses, Buddhist “angels,” bodhisattvas, and high-born court women. The case could be made that such a mask is one of the tools used to create a portrait on stage, when worn in a particular performance, but in its own right, a noh mask is just what a portrait is not; it enables a fluidity of identity, allowing an actor to become someone he is not and impressing that someone onto a generic template that only then, in combination with other features of the drama, permits the creation of a dramatic subject.

Images of artists models are, similarly, not portraits. Their facial features might be closely reproduced in a given painting or

sculpture, but even when recognizable, these images might not be considered portraits: thus, Michelangelo could reproduce the physiognomy of a specific man with a vivid sense of identity, but not, himself, count that as a portrait at all. Giorgio Vasari records, in fact, that Michelangelo refused to do portraits “unless the subject was one of the most perfect beauty.”¹⁷ Perhaps Vasari cannot be taken at his word completely, for there are several plausible self-portraits of Michelangelo, but many critics follow Vasari in counting only those self-portraits and a single drawing of one Andrea Quaratesi as actual portraits, even though there are innumerable images of wonderfully individuated persons of great vividness and presence in his oeuvre.

Character?

Of all the claims made about what constitutes a portrait, the most problematic holds that the true portrait should tell us something about the character of its subject.

Aristotle is widely quoted as having said that the aim of art is to present not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance. Although the quotation may not be reliable—it does not occur verbatim in any of his extant works—there are passages in the *Poetics* that discuss the revelation of character in tragedy. It is important to note that Aristotle’s remark, if he did indeed make it, was based on the dramatic and verbal expression of such character, not on an image.

Nonetheless, numerous critics and scholars of art history have made such a claim for portraiture. The English Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones stated, “The only expression allowable in great portraiture is the expression of character and moral quality, not anything temporary, fleeting, or accidental.”¹⁸ The celebrated art historian and museum director John Pope-Hennessy refers frequently to character in his opus, *The Portrait in the Renaissance*. Sometimes his remarks are sheltered behind assertions about the intentions of the artists he studies, as when he speaks of a face

“conceived as a paradigm of character.”¹⁹ And if he sometimes seems to be speaking of historical approaches to portraiture, reaching back to Pliny, he nonetheless quotes approvingly “a great critic of Italian art [who] has written . . . ‘What is at one moment the projection of pure vision, is at the next a delineation of those moral and intellectual features we are wont collectively to call character.’”²⁰ More recently, Shearer West asserts that “artists and sitters have also found the signs of age and experience a stamp of character, wisdom, and experience[sic], and thus potent material for expressive portraiture.”²¹

These and like assertions are unsustainable if taken literally; that is, if we are meant thereby to understand that the portrait in itself, its material self, gives viewers access to the mental or ethical character of the sitter. As children, we learn “not to judge a book by its cover”; we are admonished that a person’s appearance can be deceptive, and yet some claim that the appearance of a person on a canvas or a scroll or in a fresco or sculpture reveals “character.” Now, it does seem plausible that we, as viewers of portraits, can attribute emotional states to portraits (not necessarily consistently), but even if we cannot always agree on *what* state is being portrayed in a portrait, we nonetheless think it important that *some* state, preferably a subtle or sublime one, be discernible on the face of the portrait’s subject.

Emotional states — elation, resentment, bitterness, dejection — might all be perceived in the facial expressions or the bodily dispositions of a given portrait subject, but even in this case, there is plenty of room for error. Imagine being shown the iconic photograph of Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out at the camera (fig. 1.4). Now imagine the photograph isn’t famous and you’ve never heard of Albert Einstein. Could you tell that the person you’re looking at was one of the great geniuses of the twentieth century, or might he not, just as well, be the resident of an institution for the deranged? Or conversely, look sometime at the face of the woman in Géricault’s *La monomanie de l’envie*, also known as *Hyena of the Salpêtrière*, a woman

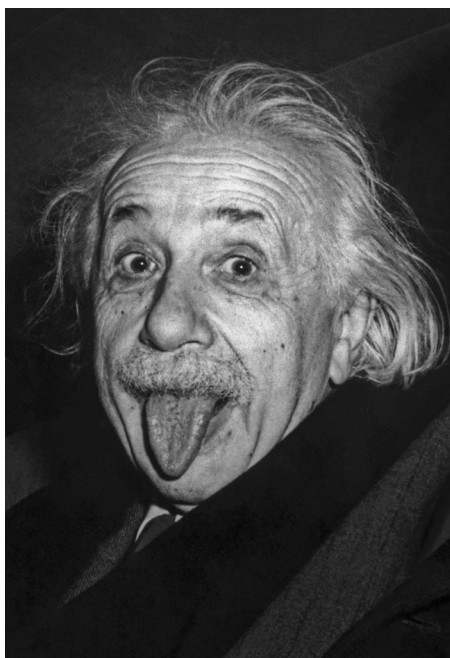


Figure 1.4 Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue, detail from a 1951 photograph taken on his seventy-second birthday by Arthur Sasse. UPI/Alamy.

who, as the title has it, is mad with envy. What if the title of the picture were instead, *Devout Peasant Contemplating the Sin of Envy*. Would that be any less plausible as a reading of the painting (fig. 1.5)?

Perhaps it isn't fair to choose examples with such "extreme" expressions on their faces. In general, portraitists do not choose to depict their subjects with violent or exaggerated expressions. This is especially the case with portraits bought and paid for, either in a direct transfer of money or some commodity or under the more veiled circumstances of patronage. But with conventionally placid subjects, the portraitist faces a great artistic challenge: how to aspire to excellence while depicting only decorous emotions? That in these circumstances one should be expected to perceive or even create an image that *tells* us about the subject's character . . . it would be an ideal if not entirely imaginary portraitist who could accomplish this.



Figure 1.5 Théodore Géricault, *La monomanie de l'envie*, also known as *Hyena of the Saltpêtrière*, 1822. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

But that is not to say that portraits cannot or do not participate in a discourse on character. It is, though, in combination with writing that this can happen. Once we have a caption, a story, or at least a name to attach to an image, it becomes much easier for us to understand who is depicted. *Mona Lisa* is mysterious enough as is. Who would she be without her name?²² Thus, even though the writing in question can be very sparse, it still remains a crucial supplement to the image, creating a bridge to further discourse.

Sometimes the person depicted in a great portrait is someone about whom there is a great deal to know. Take, again, Abraham Lincoln in Matthew Brady's 1864 photographic portrait. Each time we learn something new about Lincoln, then see the portrait anew, do we not see more of Lincoln's "character" in the image?

These are rhetorical questions, and if you are not in agreement,

then I am even more grateful that you are reading these words, and I hope to bring you more to my view in what follows.

Many of the questions I raised earlier, though, before I started talking about character, were not rhetorical questions, and my aim throughout this book will be as much to raise questions as to provide information or lay out my own point of view. I do admit to a point of view, though, so: this book is written in part out of frustration that “portraiture” has been constricted as a topic in critical discourse, whether in art history, history more generally, or in the study of religion or even philosophy, broadly construed.

There are great monographs on specific portraits or types of portraits, defined according to certain standards of attribution or aimed toward the investigation of a given artist’s subject position vis-à-vis a sitter. There are also fine studies of portraits situated within a limited cultural context or of a specific thematic, cultural, or political inflection. There are illuminating surveys of the history of portraiture, too, as long as that hazy geographic designation, “the West,” is coupled with temporal limits that begin somewhere in the European late “Middle Ages” or early modern period. Indeed, any attempt at a broader “survey” per se would probably be imprudent. There are simply too many kinds of portraits from too broad a cultural spectrum for this to be practicable. Yet there is a countervailing urge to stretch as far as possible, if you love portraits, for the very reason that they have been done so eloquently since ancient times in so many places and in the most diverse cultures and circumstances.

Some cultures don’t seem to produce portraits. And in some cultures, considered over time, interest in portraits and portraiture waxes and wanes. That said, though, there are portraits of breathtaking insight to be seen, from the third millennium BCE to the third millennium CE, from forested monasteries in central Japan to the plains of central Spain, from the Nile Valley to the canyons of Manhattan.

But what happens when culturally, geographically, or historically unconnected portraits are put side by side? What do they tell

us about portraiture in general that we would not see without the comparison? That's a big question, too big for me, but there are ways in which it can be circumscribed and still, I hope, be useful for our engagement with portraits. The way I intend to go about this comparison stems directly from the frustration with "character" that I jabbed at above. What I want to do is flip the word "character" away from its supposed nexus in ethics or morals to a different nexus, one that entails the *written* character. Thus: *Writing on Portraits*.

Before we can properly engage the three detailed studies that occupy the better part of this book, we need to come to agreement on some general terms regarding "writing" vis-à-vis the portrait image.

We must be disabused of the notion that "writing" is exclusively the transcription of speech. As a recording of speech, whether in alphabets, syllabaries, or ideographic systems, writing leaves a lot to be desired.²³ The sounds of speech are "written" for normal readers only through standardized and often fossilized systems that do not transparently reflect actual speech.²⁴ Writing systems do not effectively encode intonation, or irony, or differences in sound relating to region or class or gender. But from another perspective, writing has always been a lot more than alphabets or syllabaries or ideographs or the putatively "transparent" recording of something as ephemeral as speech. Writing, for one, has portability over time and space, and writing entails vision. Our ability to read is contingent upon our ability to see (even when "seeing" is extended to encompass reading with the visionary facility of a reader of Braille). And seeing through writing weds us to the world of all visual phenomena and to the wonders of visual aesthetics.

Writing is also always materially constrained. Even today, when its most salient energies appear to reside in electrons, we still need screens and keyboards and cables and plugs; in earlier contexts, writing inhabited material worlds of clay and reeds, say, or brush and paper, or stone and chisel, and these materials not only conditioned the ways in which writing could be accomplished, but also

imparted to it a trace of the writer, whether discernable in the stroke of a brush or the angle of a pen or a now silent, but visible testimony of the scrape of copper into limestone.

The writing we will find on portraits in this book will be mostly in Egyptian, Chinese, and Castilian Spanish, with more modest examples in Japanese, Latin, and Greek, with a few words of Hebrew. The genesis of this project came from a consideration of the first two writing systems mentioned above in relation to specific bodies of portraiture. This will come as no surprise when one realizes that the writing systems used for Egyptian and Chinese bear particularly intimate relations with the respective visual cultures in which these systems are used, not the same kinds of relations, but nonetheless more obviously intimate relations than those between phonetic systems such as alphabets and syllabaries with the visual cultures in which they are used.

What surprised me, though, in moving on from Egyptian and Chinese to the putatively phonetic writing of Latin, Castilian, and English, was how strong a relation continued to obtain between that phonetic writing and the visual arts of seventeenth-century Spain and twentieth-century America. This will be explored in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, while we take the opportunity to gain a closer understanding of writing on portraits in Egypt and medieval East Asia in the second and third chapters. Before we move on to that, though, it will be useful to define some terms that will appear again and again in this book.

It will probably be easy to entertain my assertions that portraits in Egyptian and Chinese (or Sino-Japanese) contexts share an *ideographic* character with the writing that accompanies them. Both the Egyptian and the Sino-Japanese systems have an ideographic character that comfortably shares a physical presence with the subjects they refer to.

Despite this overall commonality, however, the actual mechanics of writing Egyptian and writing Chinese could hardly be more different: Egyptian is uniquely tenacious in preserving its iconicity, that is, the resemblance between written signs and objects in

the world. It also privileges the chiseling of its texts into the hard surface of stone; Chinese, on the other hand, heads along a boldly expressionistic trajectory with meticulously schematized written signs (only a fraction of which were ever “pictographic,” even in ancient times). The Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans have made excellent use of an East Asian invention, paper, which, though relatively durable, is also flexible. The combination of ink made with soot and animal glue on a highly absorbent support (paper or silk) with no erasability means that even the most mediocre bureaucratic competency in these written systems requires a daunting level of calligraphic facility. These features require long periods of apprenticeship in writing, but also valorize spontaneity in the act of writing as a testimony to mastery. (This has led some to the erroneous belief that this long-studied skill gives expression to the ethical “character” of the writer.)

The Egyptian and Chinese (or Sino-Japanese) writing systems will be considered in more detail in the relevant context in the chapters below. It is important to say here, though, that even in purportedly phonetic writing systems such as our alphabet, there are many signs that are “ideographic.” “Ideographic,” in such a case, includes not only pictures, icons, and numerals, but also emojis and emoticons, hashtags, and a surprisingly broad array of mundane written signs that do not express sound.²⁵

We should halt for a minute before the word “ideograph” to think more extensively about what it means. For our purposes, it refers to written signs that express meaning through more than sound alone, sometimes without sound altogether. Some of these signs are indeed pictures, or “pictographs.”²⁶ For these we will prefer the term “icon,” especially in using the adjective “iconic.”²⁷ These signs generate meaning based on their resemblance to objects in the material world. In some cases, these signs are just what they look like: WYSIWYG, “what you see is what you get.” In our common experience, road signs designating “deer crossing,” for instance, with a black deer springing across a yellow diamond, utilize such iconicity.

Other kinds of road signs, such as directional arrows, work *schematically*, more as logical diagrams than pictures of things in the world. These, too, are ideographs, in that they indicate meaning, but carry no specific phonetic information. Numerals belong in a similar category, in that they have specific phonetic readings in specific languages, but can be read and understood without recourse to any specific phonetic reading.

A broader range of meaning accrues to certain kinds of icons, and their “iconicity” resides not only in their resemblance to things in the world, but also in their high prominence as visible, readable signs. The crucifix, although not usually thought of as a written sign, nonetheless exhibits a type of iconicity that points to the broader semantic field of the “icon.” It purports to represent something material and real in the world of the Christian past, but also connects to a complex network of beliefs, assertions, dogma, histories, legends, and myths that have accrued to it over millennia. Such complexity is native to the ideograph, part of its utility and indivisible from its enigma. That enigma, as we will see, is an integral part of the portrait, as well, and the way writing relates to it.

This enigma relates not only to ideographs, but also to portraits in general. One thing that we can say with confidence about the portraits focused on in this book is that comparing them highlights their ambivalence. In each case, the creation of a subject entails a chain of ambivalences, and in that I stress the etymology of *-valence* (for “value,” “strength,” or “capacity”) as well as *ambi-* (“on both sides”). *Ambi-* implies a shared value, with at the same time, a doubleness; thus, the two parts of “value” or “capacity” are constituted in separation. This must have to do with balance, as well, but if equivalence means to have equal value on different sides, ambivalence portends the possibility of imbalance, of unequal values on different sides.

What this has to do with portraiture and writing finds specific cultural ramifications in the Egyptian, Zen, Velazqueño, and Warholian contexts in which we find these portraits. In each context, ambivalence plays an important part in what constituted the portrait.

The portrait is named and naming. Whether by reconstructing an effaced inscription, or matching a caption to a face, or calling into question the significance of a face vis-à-vis some person having such-and-such a name, all these engagements are involved in the portraits we study. The urge to name is at the same time an urge to give voice to the image, to saying its own name, even though the “saying” comes not from sound, but from writing, which may come full circle to be a kind of writing that makes some use of pictures. Ambivalently, however, the attachment of a name to a portrait may not, in fact, specify the subject of the portrait, but rather its owner. The carving of multiple cartouches on Amenemhat’s sphinxes, with his own name erased, as we will see, exemplifies this shift from subject to owner. More subtly, we see it in the inscription of the name “Velázquez” in a corner of a painting, or on a letter pictured in one, or present in its nonpresence on a *cartellino*, or, most magnificently, in evidence of the artist’s own strokes on a portrait of someone else. The master’s career-long quest to be recognized as noble finds its particular biographical and cultural context in this case, of course, but the intrusion of the stroke, with its modulation from near effacement in the early royal portraits to its bold exercise in mid- and late-career portraits of “palace vermin,” this intrusion, or, better, “insistence” on the stroke calls to mind the stroke in its indexicality on Zen portraits, *chinsō*, and even as it comes back around, deconstructed, in the purposeful technical errors that Warhol deploys in his screenprint portraits. Those aren’t exactly strokes, but they are indices of the presence of Warhol (and his studio) in all his portraits of the celebrities, wannabes, and politically or otherwise noteworthy persons in his ambit. These, then, will be the material for the discussions that follow.

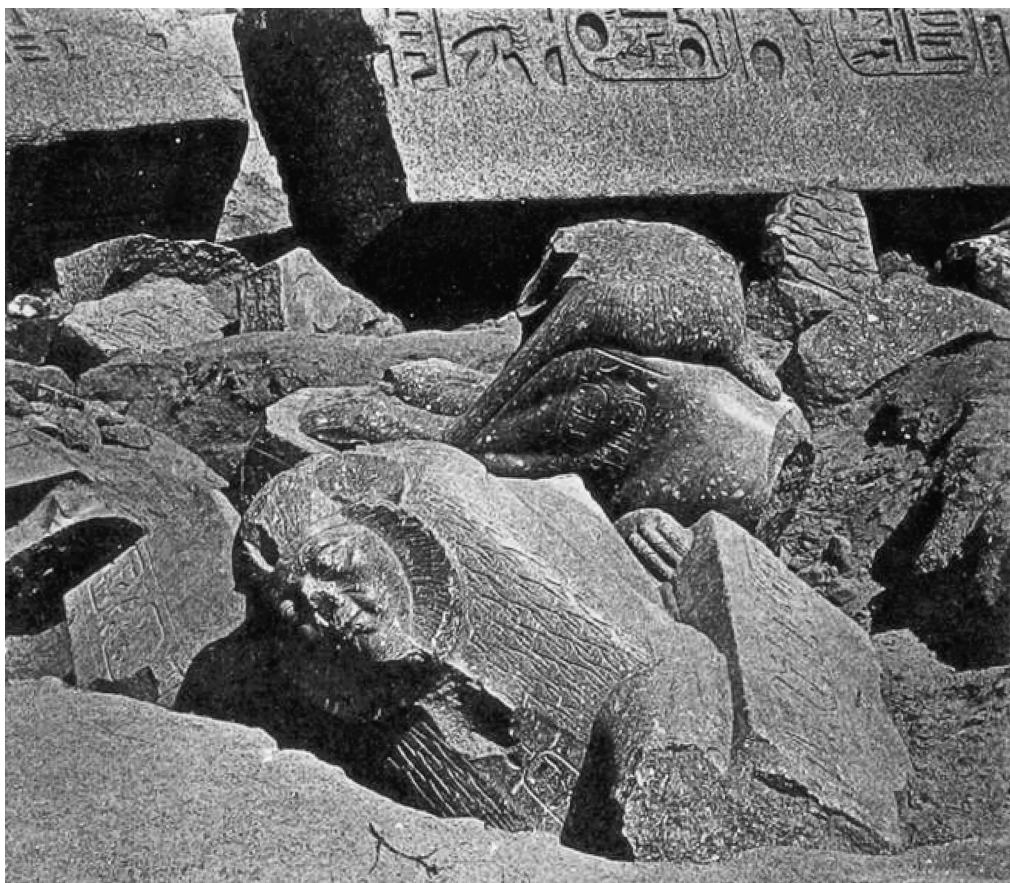


Figure 2.1 The Black Sphinxes, with other sculpture discovered by Auguste Mariette at Tanis. From William Flinders Petrie, *Tanis I* (1883–84) (London: Trübner, 1885), plate 13.5.

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