**ABOUT PORTRAITURE**

If we want to understand the status and significance of contemporary portraiture, we have to return to the past at least partially, in particular to the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century is an extremely important period in our European civilisation, which was significantly enriched by knowledge of human history, and at the same time it opened up avenues to our present.

In the nineteenth century, an unprecedented number of inventions, the opening up of new trade routes and the industrialisation of production created the idea among people that a golden age of prosperity was dawning for everyone. But the reality was different – machinery extended working hours, the concentration of people in cities worsened living conditions, and competition provoked predatory ruthlessness.

Artists, sensitively observing the world around them, became disillusioned with the development of civilisation and gradually began more and more to turn away, first from harmful reality, and later from reality entirely. The impressionistic narrowing of reality into only what can be seen becomes a solution to creative problems in Cubism and an escape into dreams and fantasies in surrealism. This process concludes with abstraction as a definitive rejection of reality. This, needless to say, refuted reality as one of the two pillars of the European classical tradition and, of course, thereby also forced out portraiture, which is not possible without a sense of recognised reality.

Modern and post-modern art then overturned the second pillar, on which art had stood since antiquity: rationality. If the main cause for the rejection of reality was disillusionment with the development of civilisation, the main cause for the post-modern rejection of rationality was disillusionment with the practical effects of ideology, whether nationalist or social. People had had such high hopes for them – and then these ideas gave rise to two horrendous world wars, wars that caused the death and untold suffering of millions of people. The period after the end of the Second World War, the period of the second half of the twentieth century, was under the shadow of the threat of global catastrophe and art tried to escape from thoughts of this reality into irrationality.

Modern and particularly post-modern art has thus rejected efforts to depict life, to justify its expression and its meaning as a whole and in detail. It has rejected the grand narrative, logic, order, it has rejected ideas, reason and knowledge, it has rejected the search for truth – in the words of the philosopher Bergson, the twentieth century has become the century of the unconscious.  
Artists have returned to the starting point in the development of society and artificially created a situation almost identical to primitivism and prehistory when our ancestors lived in a world they did not understand, which they were unable to control and which was a complete mystery to them.

Today’s artist also works in a world which, according to art theorists, he does not understand and which he often does not want to understand either. Indeed, today’s rich civilisation does not even require it of him and lets him entertain himself and others with his work, and prefer play to thinking. The artist has ceased to be a messenger of faith, has ceased to be a philosopher, has ceased to be an engineer of anything and has become an entertainer. Art has become a collection of inconsequential games; it has moved, figuratively speaking, from the theatre building to the arena, popularity has replaced social gravitas. Today’s artist has freed himself from all limitations and from all taboos. He is completely free, except for being a slave to the market which moulds him into the role of showman and businessman.

Contemporary art mixes all values and dimensions, high and low, traditional and new, primitive and sublime, serious and banal – although not evenly. One can say that what has been the objective of art throughout history, namely truth and beauty, has been ousted from art and, on the contrary, what has always been on the periphery of art or outside it – ugliness, tastelessness, dilettantism – has been drawn into the centre of art.

Polarity is emphasised, but that does not apply to realism – and that does not mean portraiture either, which cannot be without reference to this classical tradition. For that reason alone it stands not only apart from, but often also against most of the tendencies of contemporary art.

The question today is: can portraiture return to the art from which it has been so brutally pushed out throughout the whole of the twentieth century? The answer must again be sought in the social situation and its new movement. As a result of the scientific and technological revolution, reason is becoming the decisive force, education and information the most progressive capital. This is returning rationality and reality to art. This is creating the prerequisites for a new renaissance and it is this renaissance that portraiture is opening the way to today.

Portraiture is not something that has been surpassed by the modern age, but, on the contrary, it is what the new age is bringing. It is portraiture that is able to build relatively quickly on the rich European cultural tradition, it is portraiture that is able to integrate the past and the present, that is able to combine the objective and the subjective into a new quality.

It is portraiture that can overcome today’s cliquishness and random chaos through its striving for form and order. Through its communicative nature, it can change today’s isolation of the artist from the public and, what is no less important, with its demands on technique and craft it can build a dam against the flood of dilettantism and artistic inadequacy.

By its exacting nature, portraiture has always been the pinnacle of artistic endeavour, it has been the most widely respected discipline and it is quite possible that it will again take a place of prominence and dignity in the new renaissance. Understandably, the deepening isolation of portraiture and the interruption of its natural development has had its consequences – only a very few artists are technically equipped enough to master it, few artists can overcome convention and lingering prejudices. Only a few artists can cope with the competition that photography offers, few can balance their own psyche and artistic personality with that of the sitter. With a portrait, the artist cannot let his imagination run wild, he cannot completely rely on intuition, he cannot elevate himself above the sitter and beyond the control of the viewer.

The extraordinary difficulty with portraiture is that it eliminates the attractiveness of chance, that with just a touch of the brush the face changes its expression, that with just a millimetre shift in the drawing and minimal changes in the valence you are looking at a different person in the painting.

It is the constant attention, the constant self-control of the painter’s own sensibility and the energy of his artistic rendition, the necessity of keeping one’s own personality in the painting while fully expressing the personality of the sitter that makes portraiture such a difficult and demanding painting discipline.

Portraiture cannot be placed in the all-encompassing category of all possible artistic games; portraiture has always been and shall remain in the category of art. That is why there are so few painters who can paint heads and portraits as part of their work.

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