Making the Subject of Portraiture in a Trans-Asian Context (London, 5-6 Dec 24)

SOAS University of London, UK, Dec 5–06, 2024
Deadline: Jul 29, 2024

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Making the Subject of Portraiture in a Trans-Asian Context ca. 1500-present day.

Portraits have commonly been understood as naturalistic likenesses of human beings, centred on the face. The work of scholars such as Jean Borgatti, Richard Brilliant (1990) and Joanna Woodall (1997) opened the field in conceptualising portraiture as a truly multi-local genre, foregrounding relational and performative processes. Following their research, this symposium defines portraiture as a process where subjectivities are constructed as a result of the collaboration between artists, patrons, sitters, and viewers living in a specific time and space, This call for papers therefore is addressed to scholars of art, cultural, visual and material culture at any career level who explore how notions of subjectivity are constructed in text and images created between the sixteenth century and the present day in Asia and its diasporas. The symposium organisers will consider papers analysing literary and pictorial processes of embodiment through the production of objects and artefacts such as paintings, photographs, prints, sculptures, ceramics, jewellery and currency; and of designed spaces including gardens and architecture.

Portraits have long been studied as documents or biographies of a person that once existed. Without denying the capacity of a portrait to index a living person, the symposium wishes to address the varied performative elements that portraits display in the Asian context. These performances reveal the enactment of class, gender and race of specific societies and cultures of Asia and its diasporas. Understanding the performative function of portraiture in Asia, we argue, reveals cultural, social, religious and philosophical ideas that are important to understanding the region.

This two-day in-person symposium focuses on the portraiture of Asia with two specific purposes in mind. First, to decenter studies of Asian portraiture from Eurocentric conceptions of subjecthood and thus to expand the field of portraiture studies; second, to foreground the connections, transfers and tensions articulated by portraiture within the trans-Asian context. The focus on Asia should not be read as exclusionary, but rather as the intent to initiate a dialogue with existing research on the portraiture of other regions such as Africa and Europe. Thirty-five years after Borgatti, Brilliant and Woodall's contributions to the field of portraiture studies, the symposium 'Making the Subject of Portraiture in a Trans-Asian Context ca. 1500-Present Day' proposes to take stock of a changing field by contributing the scholarship of art, cultural and literary historians, anthropologists and specialists in gender and critical race theory whose research interests focus on the embodiment of selfhood in portraiture from Asia.

We therefore invite papers which develop our core concern with ‘Making the Subject’ and with the performative dimensions of portraiture in Asia.

Suggested topics (but not limited to):
- Dimensions of reality in portraiture
- Issues of re-/presentation
- Issues of materiality, style and making
- Portraiture and authority: imperial, monastic, patriarchal or cultural
- Cults of personality
- Portraiture and changing notions of beauty
- Religious and philosophical dimensions of portraiture, including rituals and ceremonies
- Issues of display and viewing – notions of theatricality and performance
- Gendered dimensions of portraiture, including theorisations of gender performance
- Self-portraiture of female and male artists
- Race and ethnicity in portraiture
- Portraiture as currency and commodities
- Fashion and material culture in embodied images
- Non-anthropomorphic portraiture, such as sacred geographies, depictions of nature, non-human subjects, and gardens
- Cross cultural exchange - i.e. portraits of Asians by non-Asians and vice versa, and similarly within the Asian region.

Please send a 300-word abstract plus short bio (150 words max) for 20-minute presentations to the organisers: Dr Mariana Zegianini - mz15@soas.ac.uk and Conan Cheong - 656531@soas.ac.uk, by Monday 29 July 2024.

A selection of the conference papers will be included in a proposal for an edited volume to be considered for publication. Further details will be announced at the conference.

Reference:
CFP: Making the Subject of Portraiture in a Trans-Asian Context (London, 5-6 Dec 24). In: ArtHist.net, May 24, 2024 (accessed Nov 27, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/41949>.