Reconsidering the Origins of Portraiture (Cracow, 16–18 Apr 15)

Cracow, Apr 16–18, 2015
Deadline: Jan 15, 2015

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“Reconsidering the Origins of Portraiture”

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Deadline for sending abstracts: 15th January, 2015

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Thanks to extensive research and exhibitions in recent years our knowledge and understanding of portraiture in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance has deepened significantly. Many detailed studies have problematised this genre and departed from a portrait’s simple equation with a mimetically accurate likeness. Current interpretations show that in the later Middle Ages, when more sophisticated tactics of representing nature started to be employed, the individualised likeness was meant not to imitate actual facial features, but rather to be a visual staging, a rhetorical commentary in which the individual’s virtues and qualities were conveyed. Likeness thus understood enriched and offered an alternative for a symbolic and conventional means of representation found in the “poetics of materials”: coats of arms, inscriptions, and so forth. Furthermore, in Renaissance recording individual physiognomy did not constitute a sufficient mode of identification (spatial context, costume, heraldry, inscriptions etc. still playing a key role) for, as it was commonly believed, a correctly made portrait should perpetuate not only an outward appearance, but most of all, the sitter’s internal qualities.

Accordingly, it is difficult to agree with the notion of portraiture that was established during the 20th century which assumed that the independent portrait is linked par excellence to the Renaissance and the birth of the modern individual. Petrarch for instance informs us about a posthumous likeness of the cardinal Napoleone Orsini that John of Arezzo was to deliver to pope Clement VI; records from an inventory of Charles V, king of France, mention four images of John II the Good, Charles IV, Edward III and the king himself that were kept in the Hotel de St. Pol, and an unusual representation of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV on his personal seal in which his individualised likeness is surrounded by a rectangular frame suggests the presence of an independent panel-portrait. All these, and many other examples, allow us to suppose that independent portraiture existed at least from the mid-14th century. The famous portraits of Jean le Bon in the Louvre and Rudolf IV in Vienna’s Dom- und Diözesanmuseum could also be viewed in this context, and interpreted not as heralds of modern portraiture – as they were understood by Harald Keller

in his famous 1939 study – but rather as symptoms of a broader, albeit difficult to grasp, artistic phenomenon.

To better understand the reasons and conditions under which portraiture developed during this period it does not suffice to step back into the 14th century. In fact, the birth of individualised portraiture should rather be interpreted as a long and complex process in which both artists and patrons, together seeking innovative ways of representation, played important roles. Stephen Perkinson has revealed how mimetic portraiture started to be appreciated by a late medieval audience as a valuable skill possessed by artists who could thus manifest their own talents and artistry. Portraiture understood in this manner is akin to the early modern concept of artistic practice in which the mind and hand of an artist are fundamental means in conditioning the perceived authenticity of a likeness. At the same time however, in the Quattrocento, at the birth of modern art theory, portraiture of an entirely different sort was being diffused, portraiture that was not based on the artist's ingenuity but on the technical reproduction of the sitter's face. The tradition of collecting posthumous masks made from terracotta, and the growing popularity of naturalistic busts, a point recently elucidated by Jeanette Kohl, together with the unabated phenomenon of placing wax figures as votive offerings in churches, indicate that Renaissance culture did not adhere to one particular mode of perpetuating the concept of the individual but rather fostered various, and at first glance, contradictory notions of portraiture.

During this two-day conference we wish to reconsider the origins of portraiture in the heterogeneity and complexity that this issue presents to researchers today. Examining both medieval ways of representation and forms of portraiture that emerged during the Renaissance we would like to break apart the perceived boundary between medieval and Renaissance portrait production. Particularly welcome are those papers in which the issue is discussed in a broader cultural perspective (political, religious, social, etc.).

We invite proposals from scholars and young researchers (PhD candidates). Please submit an abstract (no longer than 500 words) for a 25-minute papers in English.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:
- the portrait and the individual in the Middle Ages
- insignia, costume, accessories as a means of (auto)representation in a portrait
- type and/or likeness? Mimesis and portraiture
- origins and functions of cryptoportraits/identification portraits
- analogy, metaphor, affinity: levels of resemblance in portraiture
- the beginnings of physiognomic individualisation in portraiture
- portraiture and the interest in nature in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance
- from representation to art: portraiture and models of artistic patronage
- relations and parallels of visual and textual portraits
- paradigm of antiquity? Form and function of early busts
- image and memoria: portraits in the church environment
- portraiture and artists' social status
- form follows function? Independent portraits: their form and purpose
- portraiture and the print revolution
- methodological concepts of portraiture in art history of the 19th and 20th centuries

Please email abstracts to dr hab. Marek Walczak to walczak.ihs@poczta.fm and dr Mateusz Grzęda to m.j.grzeda@gmail.com. Along with your abstract please include your name, institution, paper title and a brief biography or CV.

Authors of accepted papers will be asked for conference registration fee of 50 €. It will cover the accommodation in guest rooms (two nights of April 16/17 and 17/18).

Reference:

CFP: Reconsidering the Origins of Portraiture (Cracow, 16-18 Apr 15). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 28, 2014 (accessed Nov 26, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/9018>.